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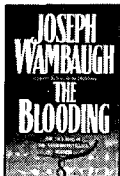
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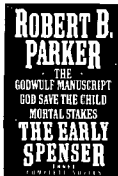


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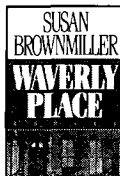
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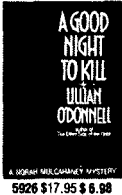
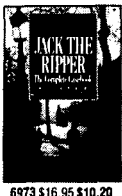
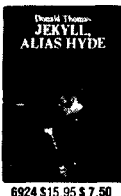
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 34, No. 10, October, 1989. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.00 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.50 in Canada. Annual subscription \$25.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$29.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1989 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3E1. ISSN: 0002-5224.

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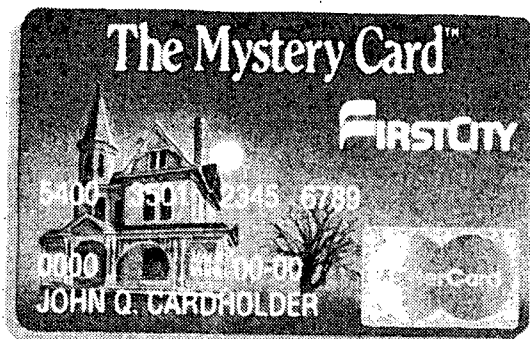
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

More good news! The Crime Writers of Canada have awarded their Amphora Prize for 1988 short fiction to "Killer in the House" by Jas. R. Petrin. The story was published in AHMM in the Mid-December 1988 issue, and of course we're delighted.

Runners-up in that category were two stories published in EQMM: "One Day at a Time" by William Bankier and "Still Life with Orioles" by James Powell.

The awards were presented on May 18 in Toronto. Last year, by the way, Mr. Petrin had two stories among the nominees: "Magic Nights" (AHMM, March 1987) and "Prairie Heat" (November 1987).

Also... Doug Allyn's "Déjà

Vu" (AHMM, June 1988) has been named the Best Short Story of 1988 by Mystery Readers International, presenters of the Macavity Awards. You may recall that the story was also nominated for an Edgar. Allyn's competition for the Macavity was Carl Martin's "Fatherly Love" (EQMM, July 1988).

Speaking of the Edgars, Bill Crenshaw, author of this year's prize-winning story "Flicks," will be one of the two authors-in-residence on the Second Annual Mystery Cruise, sponsored in part by Davis Publications. He and Ed Hoch, also an Edgar winner and author of hundreds of short stories, will be taking part in the mysterious goings-on during the cruise, scheduled for next February. (For further details, see the inside of the back cover.)

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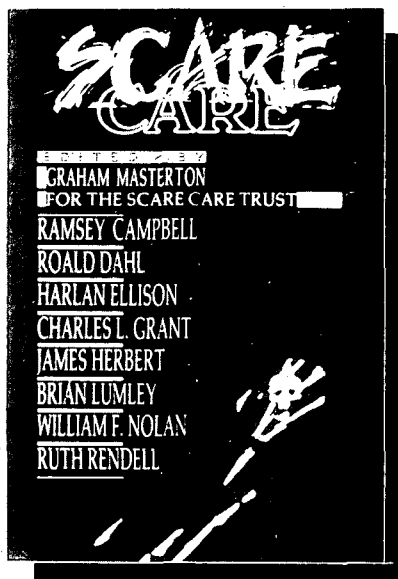
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FICTION

Stuff

by Bob Tippee

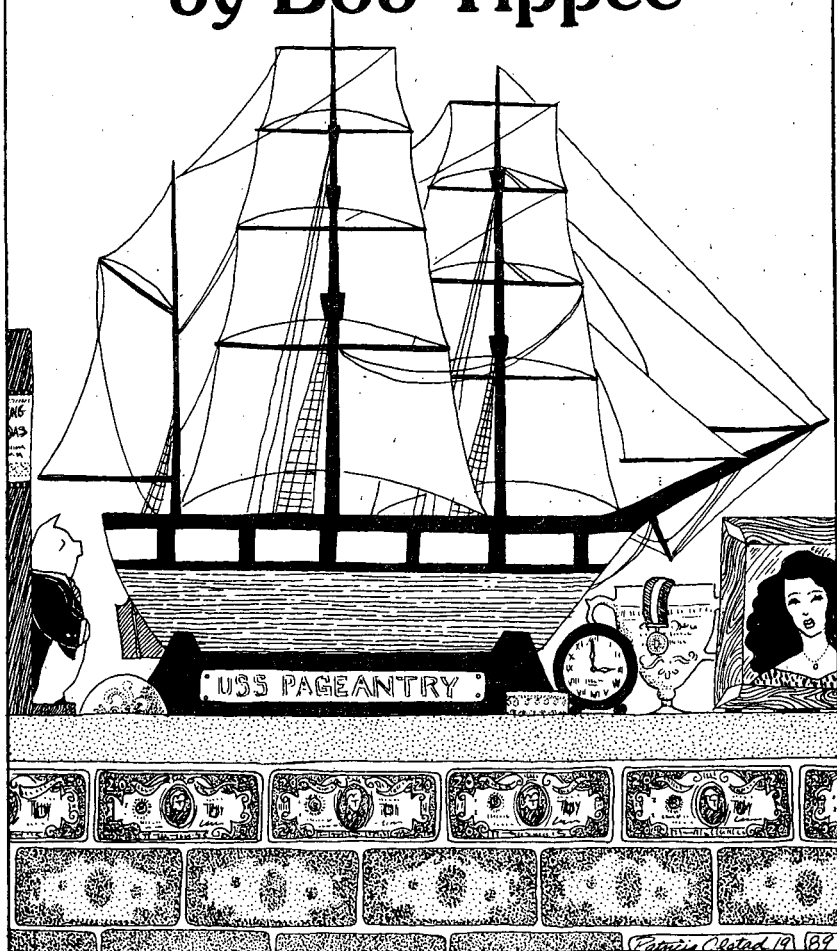


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When last seen—Orel Jameson couldn't help thinking — Norton and Bax were driving an old muddy-green Buick that needed a tuneup and ring job. Orel leaned against his own '83 Chevy and watched the Buick crunch slowly down Tomcat Creek Trailer Park's weedy gravel drive.

Minutes earlier, inside his drafty single-wide, Orel had called their association to an immediate end.

"Thought we worked pretty good together," Norton protested.

"Too dangerous to go on," Orel explained.

"Ain't that the monkey's butt," Bax remarked.

The men shook hands, and that was that. Orel knew he would miss them. But he had no time to fret. Meg, his former wife, would call any minute.

Orel's neighbors had seen everything. Mrs. Bailey, wearing her usual blue curlers and faded pink robe, was hoeing the garden next to her tidy double-wide. She paused as the wheezy Buick passed, waved to Orel across the two vacant lots separating their trailers, then returned to work. Across the drive, in a rusty green chair outside an ancient Airstream, old Krebs lowered a newspaper onto the stained undershirt he always

wore, glanced at the Buick, and nodded at Orel.

They wouldn't be curious, not in this neighborhood. Besides, they were friends—and desperate enough to trust.

But what would they think when Meg drove up in the Lincoln? Or would she bring the Mercedes?

The smoky Buick turned right onto the highway and carried Norton and Bax out of Orel's life. If Meg called now, didn't question every detail of Orel's directions, and left immediately, she might pass the Buick on her way out of town. Only Orel could appreciate the irony.

He turned from the Chevy and shuffled through dandelions and henbit to the narrow metal steps below his trailer's front door. He had some quick decisions to make about Meg and the U.S.S. *Pageantry*.

The business with Norton and Bax hadn't started as a way to get back the *Pageantry*, Orel's three and a half foot model of an eighteenth century merchant barque. To Orel, it had seemed a playful and harmless way to retaliate for Meg's spiteful conduct during the divorce and to help poor Mrs. Bailey and Krebs. It had been by accident a month earlier.

Returning home late after a speech before the Engineering

Council, Orel caught Norton and Bax inside his trailer and asked them to stay for a beer. There were a few awkward moments as Orel, squatting beside the Chevy outside, tried to convince the burglars that he meant them no harm and that he hoped for compensating assurances. They obviously stood to profit little from their endeavors, he argued, pointing out that black and white televisions and Naugahyde furniture fetched little in the pawnshops downtown. Why not sip a few suds and call it a night?

"Ain't THAT the monkey's butt!" said Bax.

"I ain't no sucker," said Norton.

"Look," said Orel, "if I was the type to empty a shotgun into two guys just because they broke into my trailer, I'd have locks on the door. Right?"

Logic worked. "Can't spend the whole damned night like this," Norton said. And Orel went inside.

After cautious introductions Orel hauled a six pack of Coors from the refrigerator. Relations warmed quickly.

"No offense, but how come you live like this?" asked Norton, a wiry man in bluejeans and a plaid work shirt with deep lines in his face. "You got money."

"Enough for beer," Orel said,

laughing. Bax laughed, too.

"Naw," said Norton. "Look at you: suit and tie. You just come back from making a speech. It was in the paper."

Orel slapped his knee. "So that's how you knew I wouldn't be home! You guys do your research."

"Norton wouldn't believe you lived here," Bax said. He was bald, solid, shaped like a torpedo. "Drove around for two hours figuring we had the wrong address."

Orel let a mouthful of beer warm before swallowing. "I got a little engineering firm that does okay," he said. "Thing is, my wife—I mean my ex-wife—she gets most of it. Alimony."

"Ain't that the monkey's butt!"

"Shut up, Bax," Norton snapped.

"She had it all while we were married so it's not that much different now," Orel said. "Faster I made it, more she spent. I got tired of having stuff, things, crap—you know? Felt like I lived in a warehouse. Hell, I don't know yet how much I really own and how much I just owe."

"Women are like that," Norton said philosophically. Bax belched and opened his third beer.

Fetching another six pack,

Orel said, "Meg didn't start off that way. She liked to go places and do things. Something happened. I don't know. Maybe it's my fault. I get pretty wrapped up in my work."

"Can't blame yourself," Norton said, pulling hard on a Coors. "Man's got to work."

Bax shook his head. "Damn women, anyway. Screw you every way but how you want 'em to."

Norton threw an empty beer can at his partner.

Orel laughed. He remembered the first time with Meg. They had Italian food, went to a movie. At her apartment afterward he found a note tucked into a warm fold of her lingerie. It said, "What took you so long?"

He tossed Norton a fresh Coors. "She can be an exciting woman. Really exciting. Something happened. I deserve some of the blame."

Norton set down his unopened beer and started to stand up, but the sound of Bax popping another tab top stopped him. "For a botched job," he said, "this didn't turn out so bad."

Bax raised a foaming-over can to toast the sentiment.

Orel barely noticed. "Stuff," he said.

"Huh?"

Orel had to slow his speech now to keep the words from

running together. "My marriage smothered in stuff."

"Ain't that the—"

"Shut up, Bax. Listen, we really got to go."

"Don't you see?" asked Orel. "I mean it's why I live like this. I got tired of accumulating stuff—appliances we never used, clothes we never wore, furniture we never sat on. Hell, the two of us lived in a house with five bedrooms. Five bedrooms! You get a feeling like a prisoner in a place like that."

Norton whistled. "The missus and me got a three bedroom apartment and four kids."

"My old lady's brother's got a big house and he ain't married," Bax said. "He's got one of them Jacuzzi machines out back. Brings his girlfriend over and they get naked in there. Some guys got the touch, you know?"

"It got like we forgot what we were married for," Orel went on. "What was important was what we had. Drove me crazy after a while." He shook his head. "Stuff."

"Stuff," repeated Norton.

"Ain't that the monkey's butt," said Bax.

"Anyway, living like this just seems a whole lot more honest," Orel said. "Besides that, there's something about living on a creek makes you feel connected, you know? Like you're part of something."

Norton eyed Orel warily, and Bax belched.

"Think about it," Orel went on. "This little two-bit watershed out here, beer cans and condom wrappers and all—it flows into the Caney, which flows into the Arkansas which flows into the Mississippi, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico. You ever seen the Gulf of Mexico?"

"Hell, no," said Norton. "I ain't never been out of Oklahoma."

"Then this probably doesn't make much sense to you, but it's all part of the same thing, you see: why I live here and why you didn't get anything out of your job tonight except a few beers."

"You're right," Norton said. "That don't make any sense at all."

Orel stood up and waved a hand in the general direction of the creek. "It's freedom! I can go down and watch that greasy water in Tomcat Creek and imagine I'm drifting all the way down to the Gulf. Down there, disagreeable women and clients who don't pay their bills don't make any more difference than empty beer cans and condom wrappers."

"Like I was saying, we gotta go."

Orel sighed and sat back down. "Help yourself to another

beer," he said. "Guess it sounds strange. It's just the way I am. Used to have this wooden ship, U.S.S. *Pageantry*, a beautiful thing. Built it when I was in engineering school. I'd seen a picture of her in a book. Love at first sight. Took me a year to find a good enough model, two years to put her together.

"Anyway, just having her around made me feel free. Got tired of flat gumbo prairie far as the eye can see, I could always study the *Pageantry* and feel like I was on the high seas someplace. Now I got Tomcat Creek."

"What happened to her—this boat?" Norton asked.

Orel shook his head and chuckled. "My ex kept it. Surprised hell out of me. Not that I blame her. I didn't bother showing up at court. Told her to keep everything. Who'd'a thought she'd keep the *Pageantry*, though?"

Norton shook his head along with Orel but obviously couldn't think of anything to say. After an awkward silence, Bax asked, "You ever see any snakes down there? In the creek, I mean?"

Orel laughed and felt better. He levered open the beer. Then it struck him—the idea. He dropped his voice an octave to propose it.

"I know a way you guys can make a lot of money."

Norton and Bax executed the first job flawlessly. Following Orel's instructions, they used a ladder to climb to the northeast second story window—the only one unprotected by the burglar alarm. Norton entered the house; Bax removed the ladder and waited outside. Norton found the three hundred fifty dollars Orel had hidden long ago in a calculus textbook in the den. Then he disconnected the VCR from the television downstairs and left by the front door, setting off the alarm.

Norton and Bax kept the money and delivered the VCR to Orel the next morning. Orel gave them instructions and a date for the next job. He gave the VCR to Mrs. Bailey, who responded with a bunch of fresh carrots and a bowl of peas.

The message to call Meg was waiting for him at the office.

"I thought you'd like to know I've been robbed." Her voice was icy.

"Sorry," he said.

"Is that all? Somebody was in our house, for God's sake!"

"Your house. You got everything. I got the bills. Call the police?"

"No, I didn't call the police. The alarm went off. The police were there when I got home. I suppose you've forgotten, but the fourth Thursday is my

Community Center meeting. I told you that alarm wouldn't stop a determined burglar."

"What'd they take?"

All she missed was the VCR. She didn't know about Orel's money stashes, an old defense against her spending sprees. She also didn't know about the unprotected upstairs window, his way of making certain he always could get into the house if he ever forgot his keys. The police speculated that a burglar had picked the front door lock, set off the alarm, and grabbed the VCR before fleeing.

"I really am sorry," he said when she finished.

"No, you're not."

"I'm glad you called."

"No, you're not."

"I am."

"If you were, you'd—"

"I'd what?"

"Never mind. Goodbye."

What had she wanted him to say? That he'd stop by and change the lock? That he'd take her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right? Did she want him back?

No, he figured. Too much ugly had come between them. The divorce. The arguments about money. Her complaints about the time he devoted to his business. No, she didn't want him. Not now. Not ever.

Orel timed the second job for

the evening of the annual Charity League gala the following week. Meg wouldn't miss the event, even unescorted. Or maybe she had someone . . .

Anyway, she'd be out of the house for hours. This time Norton and Bax would take a multiband radio from the family room and four hundred and some dollars—Orel couldn't remember exactly how much — from behind the stereo cabinet.

Orel watched the Charity League gala on a television in his office. He caught sight of Meg once. A pale, bald man in a tuxedo stood beside her. Orel couldn't tell if he was her escort or someone who happened to be there when the camera caught Meg. It didn't matter.

Norton and Bax delivered the radio the next morning.

"Went slicker'n downtown in the rain," Norton reported. "When we gonna try it again?"

Orel thought of the bald wimp in the tux standing next to Meg at the gala. "I'll have to think about timing. Got a phone number?"

Orel gave the radio to Krebs, who rejoiced at the prospect of never having to miss another Cardinals game now that he could tune in St. Louis.

When Meg called that afternoon, she sounded different.

"Orel, I'm afraid, really afraid." Her voice wavered. Orel

thought she might be crying.

After she described the burglary he said, "It's obviously some nickel and dime operator watching the house, waiting till you're gone. You're not in any danger."

"It's just the thought of somebody—you know, coming into our house," she sobbed.

"What do the police say?"

Meg sniffed her way back to control. "They'll drive by more often for a while. They don't think the burglars will try again."

"I think they're right. Anyway, it's just stuff."

Meg bawled. "Not stuff. Our things. Somebody's stealing our things."

She wasn't arguing. He felt sorry for her; whether because she hurt or because the loss of a VCR and radio hurt her so much, he couldn't be sure.

"Thank God you're okay," he said.

"You mean it?" she asked eagerly.

"Yeah."

"Orel, I miss you."

"I wouldn't have handled the burglaries any better than you did."

"Not that. I mean I really miss you."

He couldn't think what to say.

"Maybe we could see each other," she said.

"I don't think—"

"Just to talk."

"We'd fight."

"Oh, Orel—" She started crying again. "Even fighting's better than being alone. I miss you. I really do."

This wasn't the Meg he had divorced. This was the Meg to whom he had proposed marriage twelve years earlier as they strolled at twilight along the bank of Caney River, the Meg who not only said yes on the spot but who also listened to his theories about rivers and the Gulf of Mexico and freedom, the Meg who wanted to go skinny-dipping afterward.

"We could have dinner, I guess," he said.

"I'm free every night."

"I've got to be in Wichita with a client the rest of the week. From there I go to Amarillo. Three days. And I may have to add Dallas. Depends on whether my subcontractor on a job down there can meet me there or in Tulsa."

When they were married, near the end anyway, she would have pitched a huff at his never having time for her. Now she said, "I'm free every night after that, too."

Two weeks later they met at the Plains Club. Orel arrived first, paid the maitre d' twenty dollars

for a corner table away from the piano, and tried to control his sweat glands. When Meg joined him he said, "You look great," and meant it.

"Thank you," she whispered, almost bashfully.

She looked more than great. She wore a wraparound silver and black dress that wouldn't have fit when they were married, her auburn hair pulled back in a French roll the way he liked.

"Meg, I . . . I—"

"Thanks for getting a table away from the piano," she said, sparing him a clumsy moment. "It's so much better to be able to talk."

Orel ordered a bottle of wine—a Cabernet Meg liked. As they read their menus, he muttered, "I bet none of my neighbors have ever seen a menu like this."

Meg laughed. "That's okay. They probably can't read."

Orel looked up. His observation hadn't been a joke. Meg was studying the menu. What could she know about his neighbors except that they were poor?

Maybe she was right, though. Maybe Mrs. Bailey and Krebs and the others really couldn't read. Maybe that was why they lived in tacky trailers in an untended trailer park that flooded every five years or so. No, Krebs read the newspaper, the sports

pages. Orel had seen him. Maybe people who lived in tacky trailers just didn't care. Maybe that's why Krebs never bothered to change his undershirt.

Without looking up, Meg said something about how hard it was to choose, how everything looked so good. She held the menu in her right hand. The graceful fingers of her undorned left hand delicately traced a gold chain at her neck. Orel recognized it; he had given it to her the Christmas before they divorced.

He found himself studying other details: the subtle makeup, the curious eyes, the gentle curve of her cheeks, the soft skin of her neck. Meg didn't possess a striking beauty; hers was a beauty you noticed a little at a time and never forgot. And she knew how to make it work.

Orel tried to imagine Meg in a faded pink robe and blue curlers. He tried to imagine Krebs in a tuxedo, sipping champagne and sharing his thoughts on poverty with the Charity League.

"What's so funny?" Meg asked.

Before he could invent an answer, the waiter came. He made a snap decision to have swordfish.

After dinner they went to a movie. Then Orel followed Meg home. She seemed relieved to

find the front door locked, the alarm silent.

Orel had told Norton and Bax to leave by way of the unprotected upstairs window this time.

Meg still wanted to make a cursory check of all the rooms. Orel accompanied her, comparing this oversized, overfurnished place with his single-wide on Tomcat Creek.

"Looks like everything's here," Meg declared incorrectly in the upstairs hall.

"Great," Orel said, pulling her close to him, kissing her, feeling her mold her body eagerly against his as old passions flared to life.

Minutes later, in the bedroom, he found it, the note, in the same warm place as its ancestor. And he stopped for just a minute—both of them panting, ecstatic as teenagers—to read it: "Welcome home."

Right then, he didn't care that Meg had looked into the den, directly at the shelf where he kept the U.S.S. *Pageantry*, and hadn't noticed that it was gone. And he didn't think until later about what she said when he left, after they agreed that she would call the next day for directions to his bachelorhood home, that they shouldn't rush anything, that she would visit his trailer and see if there wasn't something she could do to fix

things up, to make his life a little better until they—until whatever was going to happen happened.

What she said was, "I'm glad to have you back."

So Orel had the U.S.S. *Pageantry*, and Meg had Orel. And Norton and Bax were gone.

Orel could still smell burnt oil from the old pickup, eye-stinging fumes drifting in through the living room window, lingering like Meg's words: "I'm glad to have you back."

Orel thought the same thing about the U.S.S. *Pageantry*. Somehow, to Meg, he was like the *Pageantry*: a prized possession, something to be glad to have back.

Orel and the *Pageantry* were stuff. Just stuff.

The telephone rang. Orel picked up the *Pageantry* and carried it outside. The phone rang again.

It rang three more times as

Orel shuffled through gumbo dust and chickweed to the bank of Tomcat Creek.

The launching of the U.S.S. *Pageantry* took place immediately downstream of a decomposing tire snagged on a concrete chunk. She found strong current in the deepest part of the creek and rode in proud trim.

The phone rang again.

Orel stood, saluted, and watched the *Pageantry* list in a quartering port breeze and right herself smartly. If she could make the first turn she'd make it all the way to the Gulf.

The phone rang again.

The *Pageantry* yawed slightly to starboard as she approached the turn. A submerged log or whisky bottle must have caught her keep. It might have swamped a lesser vessel. But the *Pageantry* snapped to port with the current and slipped out of sight, upright and free.

And the phone rang one more time.

FICTION

The Suit Box

by Stephen Wasylyk

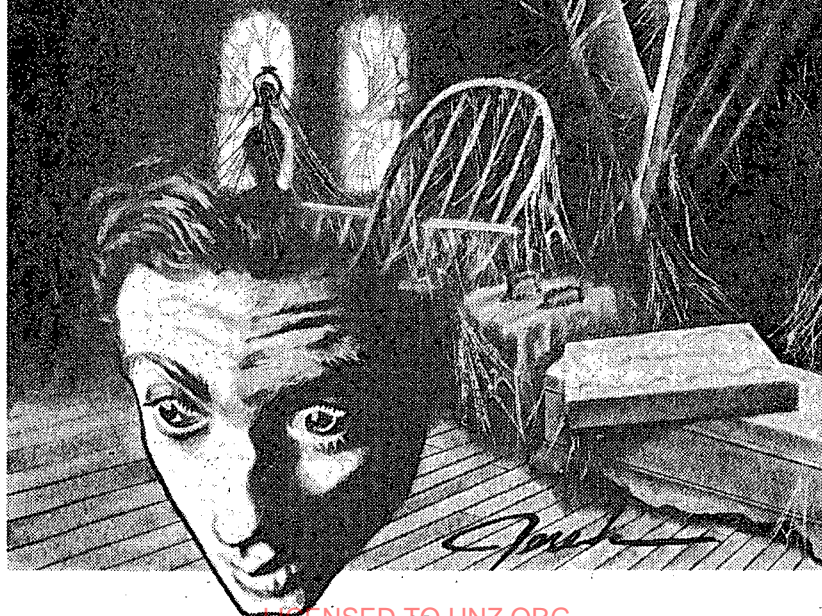


Illustration by Joe Jereda

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Arms folded, a shoulder propped against the wall at the head of the stairs in the modest, middle class home, a dapper Del Rio impassively watched me climb toward him. Even at two in the morning, when the rest of us showed up bleary-eyed, unshaven, and wearing whatever was handiest, you'd have thought he was there on behalf of the men's clothing industry instead of the detective division.

"What brings you here, captain?"

I breathed deep. Athletes were right. The legs always go first.

"Heard the call. Curious. Doesn't fit the pattern."

He shrugged. "All the others said he waved a gun. Had to happen."

The people in the small bedroom squeezed by each other as they went about their work. The patrolman outside had said the middle-aged, beauty-parlor blonde sprawled on the bed had been shot when her husband awakened and surprised an intruder. The killer escaped down the stairs and out the front door, which was standing open when the first car arrived. Not the first time someone in this neighborhood had come out of a deep sleep into the nightmare of an armed intruder in the room, but the first time the man had killed.

"What does the husband say?"

"Woke up, saw him, and charged without thinking. The first shot put a hole in the wall at the head of the bed, the second hit the wife. The husband was lucky."

"Since his wife is dead, he might not think so."

The woman's body was on her side of the single bed. Taking the angle of fire into consideration, it was possible for her to catch a bullet aimed at the charging husband, whose feet would have hit the floor on the other side. Guns in the hands of nervous people sometimes sent bullets in odd directions.

Sometimes.

"On the other hand, he might think he hit the jackpot," I said softly.

"What are you trying to tell me, captain?"

"Oh, something along the lines of, the day you show up in a dirty sweatshirt and torn jeans I don't rest easy until I know why."

"Deviations from Behavioral Patterns, Chapter Three in your book. The reason he finally used the gun is obvious." His voice was bored. "The others were smart enough to lie still and keep their mouths shut and let the man take their money. This one decided to fight."

"I'm easy to get along with, Del Rio, so it's okay to say it. Old man like me should be

where he belongs, asleep at home at this hour and letting the young ones work instead of bugging them."

"Not really. My mind was saying something like there'd be a gun around here somewhere if the man killed his wife, and he sure didn't have much time to get rid of it. The first car was here two minutes after the neighbor called."

I felt like saying, *So you never intended to look for one, dummy*, but that might have hurt his feelings and the managerial skills manual frowned on hurting a subordinate's feelings.

Instead I said, "But you haven't looked for one yet."

"Well, no—"

"Tell you what. Let's do it just to keep an old man happy." I opened a door. Bare wooden stairs led to the attic. I found a wall switch and flicked it. A feeble yellow glow lighted the usual rough, brown-with-age wooden rafters.

"Since I'm not too fond of climbing stairs when I don't have to," I told him, "suppose you look—"

I hadn't been in an attic in a long time. Condominiums come with many things. Attics aren't one of them.

—it is said that in the days before rec rooms and family rooms, and other rooms where children now play on rainy days,

rooms with toys and games and record players and radios and television sets, there were only attics. Attics, with the never-to-be-forgotten smell of dried wood and dust, where the rain whispered on the roof and the poor children had only boxes and cartons and old furniture and other flotsam and jetsam washed up on the shores of family lives, and their imaginations—

"No," I said, "I'll look up there. You check this floor."

I mounted the stairs and glanced around. Cartons, perhaps Christmas ornaments. An old wooden rocker. A couple of pieces of battered luggage. A lamp without a shade. A scarred foot locker. On the foot locker, a suit box.

A suit box.

Covered with a fine layer of dust, with the name of the store from which it had come, Lord knows how many years ago, faded into illegibility, it was a relic of a retail world long gone.

I didn't know if they were still made. I did know I hadn't seen one in years. Of light but sturdy pasteboard, they came flat; lids and bottoms separate, with locking tab and slot corners. When a man or boy bought a suit, the box was folded and assembled, the suit was carefully folded, interleaved with tissues, and placed in the box. The box was sealed with

gummed tape, and when I was a kid, you proudly walked out with it under your arm, the name of the store to the outside so that people would know you could afford a real suit from a real men's store.

Today, a plastic garment bag that will outlast the world is slipped over your purchase, hanger and all, and you march out of a mall holding it hooked with two fingers over your shoulder as if you were delivering someone's laundry.

The dead woman probably saved it because they made great storage boxes. Among other uses.

A suit box. I'd be damned—

I was ten and walking back to school after lunch.

On one side, the three story red brick wall of the silk mill stretched almost to infinity, separated from the gritty sidewalk by two yards of grayish, gravelly dirt with the remains of a broken bottle here and there, a few sprouting weeds losing the battle for survival, and scraps of dirty paper nestled against the base of the building.

On the other, the cars along the curb were lined up flat radiator to flat rears, boxy cars with square doors and square windows and flat fenders and running boards and almost

every one of them black.

Even during the Depression, the silk mill hummed, making silk stockings and certain ladies' undergarments that at ten you weren't supposed to know about. A steady, whirring monotone came through the awning-type windows slanted open above my head.

Finding it extremely important to drag an index finger along the side of each car as I passed, I was walking along the curb, deviating only when confronted by a telephone pole, when I spotted a suit box close to the building in the gravelly strip up ahead.

I changed course immediately and bent to pick it up, fingers curled in anticipation of finding only a lid or a bottom which I could hold in front of me with both hands and kick with satisfactory *boom-boom-booms* as I goose-stepped the rest of the way to school.

But when my fingers closed around it I found it wasn't just half of an empty box. It was complete, sealed with tape and very heavy. The shock stopped me cold.

Why would anyone leave a suit box with something in it here, where someone was sure to steal it?

Stunned by that stupidity, my brain was slow to telegraph a message to my hand to let go,

and another to my feet to get the hell out of there. At ten, you depend on your feet to get you out of trouble more often than you care to remember after you grow up.

A heavy hand clamped one shoulder and another tore the box from me.

"Caught you stealing, kid!"

I looked up into a face I thought would haunt me the rest of my life, the kind of face I'd seen only in gangster movies at Saturday matinees—the face of the Bad Guy. The difference was that on Saturday afternoons the face was on the screen and could never hurt me, but this one was glaring at me from inches away.

I saw a weather-stained fedora above narrow, bloodshot eyes, thin lips parted to show crooked yellow teeth. The lined, bony face hadn't seen a razor in two days, and the man emanated alcohol fumes almost heavy enough to shimmer as they rose.

I tore myself out of the hand and ran, my spine crawling, my eyes fixed on a distant streetcar, not wanting to see the gun I knew was leveled at my back where Bad Guys always shot those who crossed them. Someone shouted. I ran faster.

Jessie Owens at his best couldn't have beaten me to the schoolyard that day. I never

even paused as I went through the gate, popped through the heavy door, and flew down the hallway to my seat in the still-empty classroom, where I sat panting as if I couldn't wait for Miss Bowdoin to begin dispensing knowledge. Miss Bowdoin, who wore what seemed to be the same simple, black dress each day, pince-nez glasses suspended from a ribbon around her neck and black hair knobbed into a tight bun on the back of her head, would take care of him if he followed me. Even a Bad Guy wouldn't dare to take *her* on.

I was still alive. My insides quivered and I'd never hear what Miss Bowdoin was saying, but I was alive.

At least until classes were dismissed.

Caught in a crowd of kids pouring out of the gate, I stretched to look around and saw nothing dangerous, which didn't mean a damned thing because in those days no Bad Guy was going to start anything with a couple of hundred kids looking on.

Peter grabbed my arm. "We going the short way?"

The short way was a route that guaranteed a parental creaming for both of us if they ever found out—sliding down an embankment and walking along the railroad tracks where,

three days a week, a long freight gave us the thrill of our young lives.

Going home that way couldn't save more than two minutes, but huddling close to the embankment while the fast freight roared by at sixty miles an hour was a great deal more exciting than plodding along the streets and keeping an eye out for cars.

The earth starts to tremble as the locomotive approaches, the engineer hits the whistle for you to get the hell out of his way, and before you know it, a tremendous, deafening thunder beats on you. Your brain quivers in your skull like the earth beneath your feet. A man-made cyclone pelts you with dirt and cinders hard enough to sting and threatens to suck you beneath the wheels. Metal clanks, screeches, and moans. Track joints slammed by flying tons grunt and groan in measured cadence. You're helpless before a deafening, ruthless, overwhelming power that stretches your nerve to the point where it's almost ready to break. Clinging to the bank, Pete and I would smile weakly at each other to show how brave we were. And always it would end suddenly, the clackety-clack of the red caboose slowly fading and leaving you the legacy of a stomach feeling like a severely jarred bowl of gelatin.

I'd had enough excitement for the day. I shook off Pete's hand. "Long way," I mumbled. "I'm running."

"Whaddya mean, running? You nuts?"

"Running," I said, and took off.

Long way, I'd told him. He had no idea how long. I must have added ten blocks to the route, most of it looking back over my shoulder. I wasn't about to go anywhere near that silk mill.

When I turned into my back yard, I was dripping enough sweat to float a small boat, holding the stitch in my side and gasping for air, but again, the Bad Guy hadn't gotten me. I had enough sense to hide behind a tree until the sweat dried. Entering the house like that would lead to a great many motherly questions I couldn't very well answer without getting into more trouble.

Kids are told God keeps His eye on them constantly, and kids sometimes wonder how. That was the day I discovered He did it through agents.

Not long after my father arrived home from work and before we had time to sit down to dinner, a black police car pulled up to the curb and a uniformed policeman and a big man in a gray suit came to the door.

Looking out the front win-

dow, I almost bolted when I saw them. I'd expected the Bad Guy to rub me out, not tell the police I was stealing. Now I was going to jail. We learned early that kids were always wrong and nothing we had to say could make a difference. Beneath my panic, a coldly rational voice from the dark side of my character was whispering, *Fall down, hold your stomach, and cry. They won't arrest a sick kid.*

My father answered the knock. Voices murmured for a few moments before he invited them in.

Our living room wasn't much. My father was a big man, and when you added the man in the gray suit and the uniformed man, it left me standing in the arch to the dining room, my mother on one side and my little sister on the other.

"This is Detective Coniglia, Andy. He'd like to talk to you."

Coniglia smiled. "Nice to see you again, Andy."

What was he talking about? I'd never seen him in my life.

My little sister was wide-eyed, her favorite doll suspended by one leg at her side, a sure sign she was about to cry because a policeman in the house could only mean that I was in trouble.

My mother was glaring at me. A mother in those days glared at you in situations like that. Right or wrong, innocent

or guilty, you'd succeeded in frightening her and you'd pay for it. Furthermore, a police car before her house implied to her neighbors, sure to be watching, that she'd somehow failed as a mother. You'd pay for that, too.

"Andy," said Coniglia, "you saw a man on the street beside the silk mill at noon today. Can you identify him if you saw him again?"

Today, tomorrow, a hundred years from now, but the voice inside was now chanting, *Lie, lie, lie.*

"I didn't see anyone."

Coniglia's smile widened. "C'mon, Andy, I was there. I saw what happened. Nothing for you to worry about."

Fear sometimes makes you quick. "Then why do you need me?"

"Because his back was to me. I chased him and caught him and I know I have the right man, but he denies it and the captain says I need you as a witness."

I looked down at the carpet. How in the hell had he found me? If he hadn't seen the man that well, he couldn't have seen me very closely either.

"Wondering how I know it was you?"

God, what was he, a mind reader or something?

"Your green jacket. I figured you were on the way to school,

maybe in the fourth or fifth grade, so I went there and described you. Miss Bowdoin said it had to be you. You were the only one with a green jacket and in a deeper than normal daze all afternoon."

It was my first experience with detective work.

"Understand, you don't have to do this, but I'd appreciate it if you would come down to the station and take a look at the man. He's a thief. He and his partner have been stealing from the mill."

"Is there any danger?" asked my father.

"None at all. The man will never see the boy. He's a real weasel, and once he knows we have a positive identification, he'll sing like a bird, so there won't be a trial where Andy'll have to appear."

"Suppose he doesn't confess?"

Coniglia shrugged. "Even if it goes to trial, he can't come up with bail money. He's in to stay for at least five years."

My mother's glare was telling me to say no, but logic said that with the Bad Guy in jail, I'd have nothing to worry about.

"Okay," I said.

My father patted my shoulder. "Good boy."

They always argued out those little differences of opinion when they thought we were both asleep.

We got into the police car, all of the neighbors staring, a wide, contented smile on the face of Mrs. Rudensky, a housedressed behemoth of a woman who didn't like me. No matter how much my mother explained, she would remain a non-believer, having long since decided society would be far better off the day I was put away, preferably for life.

They lined the Bad Guy up with five or six others in a room beyond a glass window.

"Is he there?" asked Coniglia. I pointed. "Second from the left."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Coniglia grinned. "Good."

"You said he was stealing from the mill," said my father.

"He and his partner, one of the foremen. I'll be right back."

He poked his head into the room next door and talked to one of the policemen, who led the Bad Guy aside as the others walked out. Coniglia went in himself a minute or two later, carrying the suit box. He placed it on a table before the Bad Guy. Something inside the man seemed to break, and he sagged a little. Coniglia said something. The Bad Guy looked up, right at me. Coniglia had said we couldn't be seen, but I knew damned well the Bad Guy knew who was there, which told me I should have paid attention to

that glare from my mother.

Coniglia returned, carrying the box, and led us to his office, talking as we walked down the hall.

"Part of the foreman's job was to take an occasional box of stockings out of the line to check if the people were doing the packing right. The trouble was he'd take three and return two. The other he'd squirrel away in a suit box in his office. Every couple of days when the box was full, he'd tell Weasel Face and Weasel Face would wait outside. The foreman'd wait until everyone went to lunch, seal the suit box, and go into the men's room, where he'd stand on a john and hand it out the window. Quick, easy, and fast. Unless you saw the actual transfer, Weasel Face had just bought a suit and was carrying it home. I figured out what the foreman was doing and hid behind the cars outside to see who he was doing it with. Weasel Face wasn't there on time, so the foreman just dropped the box, figuring he'd be right along. He was, but Andy was a half-dozen steps ahead of him. I saw Andy pick up the box and Weasel Face grab him and say something."

He grinned at me. "What'd he say?"

"He said he caught me stealing."

Coniglia chuckled. "That's pretty funny. He's the crook, but he accuses you of stealing."

I didn't think it was funny at all.

"If you've arrested the foreman, why couldn't he tell you who he was working with?" asked my father.

"He could, but he won't rat on his pal. When I yelled at Weasel Face, he knew he was in trouble. He dropped the box, took off, and dodged into the diner around the corner to lose himself in the lunch crowd. Might have worked, but I recognized his coat."

He placed the suit box on his desk and removed the lid.

"Here we are."

Flat boxes filled it, boxes picturing a pair of shapely legs with slim thighs that ended at the top just as the view was getting interesting.

"Give them credit for good taste. They stole the top of the line. We have the shopkeeper they were selling them to, but he won't talk either."

My father's accountant's mind made him gesture toward the box.

"How much—"

"The shopkeeper paid them ten bucks, cleared about thirteen for himself. Each of them made five."

"Hardly seems worth the risk."

"Hey, Weasel Face was low man on the totem pole and he was making ten bucks a week. Plenty of people working for less than that."

As the police car drove us home, I sat there thinking that being a detective must be one of the most interesting jobs in the world.

I was a hero to everyone but my mother. My involvement with the police meant I'd surely done something wrong, but she hadn't yet determined what it was.

Holding her doll close, Charlene, not quite two years younger, stood in front of me, her eyes sparkling.

"You caught a bad guy, Andy?"

"Yeah," I said nonchalantly. Older brothers were supposed to be heroes.

And brave. So brave that in the morning I took my usual route to school past the silk mill, walking almost defiantly.

I don't know why, but word had reached there. Miss Bowdoin didn't say anything, but patted my shoulder and smiled. Pete whispered that it was the first time since one of her students had won an award three years before.

After dinner. Enough daylight remaining to play a game before mothers' voices wailed children's names into the dusk.

We played an advanced form of tag. It started the same, but when tagged by the unfortunate *it*, the victim became a hunter, obligated to seize and hold another player until he or she could be tagged by *it*, and added to the pack. In less than an hour, we'd be down to one remaining free spirit. Usually me, even though the game would end not with a final touch but with an assault of bodies that buried the victim as punishment for evading capture for so long.

Hiding was out. Speed and agility were in—along with mistrust of anyone maneuvering to get within an arm's length of you, since you seldom knew who'd been tagged and who hadn't.

I'd sprinted down the back alley to the house on the corner, which featured the only solid, five foot high wooden fence in the neighborhood. As a last resort, it could be scaled to avoid capture. Chest heaving, I poked my head around the corner to see if I'd been followed. I heard a car pull up to the curb behind me but ignored it. I've never ignored a car pulling up to the curb behind me since.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and spun me around. I looked up into the weasel face of the Bad Guy again. My heart froze.

"Listen, kid. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want—"

The unbelieving words screamed up from deep inside. "YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE IN JAIL!"

"Bail, kid. My wife begged the bail money from the neighbors. Listen—" He licked his lips and tried to smile, but those crooked yellow teeth made it more of a grimace. "You got to help me, kid. Please. Tell the cops you made a mistake. Tell the cops it wasn't me. Please—"

I tried to tear away. His hand slipped from my shoulder and clutched my wrist, his voice intense.

"Aw, kid, listen to me. I had to do it to feed my family, understand? I couldn't get a job. I'm not a crook, kid. Believe me. Just a guy down on his luck."

I was thrashing around at the end of his arm like a fish at the end of a line.

"Hey, kid, gimme a break! If I go to jail, my family'll starve! I got five kids. Please! You don't want that! Tell the cops you made a mistake!"

"HEY, YOU!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Fat Maxwell, the neighborhood beat cop, lumbering down the street.

The hand loosened and dropped almost resignedly.

"Aw, kid. Please. Gimme a break."

He ran around the front of the car to the driver's side and wrenched the door open and stood there for a moment in the angle formed by the door and the car, looking at me.

"Hold it, you!"

Fat Maxwell had fumbled his gun out from under his long uniform coat.

The Bad Guy's lips moved. I knew what he was saying.

Fat Maxwell fired into the air.

"Don't move!"

The Bad Guy bent to slide behind the wheel.

Crack!

Fat Maxwell's shot sounded nothing at all like the amplified ones I heard at the Saturday movies. It was weak and flat and I couldn't imagine anyone being hurt by it, but the Bad Guy jerked erect and slammed into the open door. He hung there as though pasted against it before he slid to the pavement.

There, on that quiet street, a freight train was passing, the ground shaking beneath me and a tremendous roar filling my ears.

The last thing I saw of him was his hands slipping behind the car like those of a drowning man going down for the last time.

Fat Maxwell ran up, his face white.

"Hey," he said to the space behind the car, his voice barely audible. He shook his head and put his gun away and came around to me.

His voice was a little unsteady. "You all right, kid?"

People were running towards us, a circle already forming.

The roar was fading but the ground still trembled and I could still see those sinking hands.

Fat Maxwell touched my shoulder. "You all right, kid?"

I threw myself at him, frantic fists tattooing the blue uniform.

"WHY'D YOU SHOOT HIM? HE WASN'T GOING TO HURT ME! YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO KILL HIM, GODDAMMIT!"

I spun and ran, pushing people aside, tears burning.

At the end of the street and diagonally across the intersection was a brewery, abandoned because of Prohibition. On the loading dock, next to the overhead door, was a small cubicle used by the shipping clerk to get out of the weather when trucks were being loaded. The door was long gone, stolen by someone who presumably needed a door, the glass long broken out of the windows.

It was a great place to hide. The windowsill was just high enough for someone my size to peer over to see danger approaching and to take action

while there was yet time.

I curled up in a corner, wrapped my arms around my legs, and buried my head on my knees, the image of those sinking hands still with me.

The Bad Guy was dead and it was my fault, a Bad Guy who really hadn't been a Bad Guy at all. I sat there and struggled with the realization that if not all ugly people were bad, then not all handsome people were good, no matter what I saw at the Saturday matinee; that there was far more to it than how a person looked.

The Bad Guy had been unlucky enough to be born with a face that could frighten people, and he'd used it the first time to take the suit box away from me. But he wouldn't have hurt me. I saw that in his eyes the second time, eyes that begged for forgiveness as they slid out of sight.

I was sitting there shaking, hating cops and asking myself why Fat Maxwell had to shoot him, when I heard a noise and looked up to see Charlene, a worried look on her face and her doll suspended by one leg from her hand.

"They're looking all over for you, Andy, but I didn't tell them you maybe could be here."

"That was good, Charlene."

I buried my face again.

"They say the bad man tried

to steal you." Her face thinned with worry. "Think one'll try to steal me, Andy?"

Her words hit and spun around in my head and made me see what Fat Maxwell had seen—an evil looking man dragging a kid he knew toward a car, a man he'd warned by firing into the air, a man who should have frozen and put his hands up but instead had tried to get away, and if Fat Maxwell had let him go, he'd be responsible if another kid at another time and place—

He couldn't know it wasn't like that and the man was trying to get away because he was in deep trouble already.

"No," I said. "No bad man'll try to steal you, Charlene."

If I said it, it was so. She smiled. "You coming home, Andy?"

I shook my head without looking up.

"Ain't—you—never—coming—home—Andy?"

The quaver in her voice made me lift my head. Her lips were trembling, and tears were creeping down her cheeks. Her doll hung neglected by her side, its skirt around its neck, its naked pink legs exposed and its blonde hair a wild halo.

Upside down, like everything else.

Education is a slow process.

I knew, without really knowing, that there would be other

burdens that would be mine and no one else's, but I couldn't just go away and hide because I'd always have obligations to others that were more important than any I had to myself.

I got to my feet and placed her doll in her arms.

"Mom says we ain't supposed to say ain't."

She giggled: at our private anti-parent joke and we walked home in the gathering dusk.

I lifted the lid of the suit box, wondering what the dead woman had used it for.

It really wasn't a suit box at all. It was the box in which she had brought home her wedding dress. Folded neatly, it now nestled there, yellowed by time. I wondered how many years ago she'd put it away up here, saving it perhaps for a daughter, perhaps just to finger occasionally while remembering— All over now.

Feeling a little guilty, I closed the lid and turned away. The yellow tinge of the dress said these two had been married a long time and just because I'd become cynical and suspicious from looking at the worst side of the human race for so long, I had no right—Hell, if the husband wanted to get rid of her, he could have done it long before this.

I turned back again, staring at fresh streaks I hadn't made

in the dust on the lid, streaks I hadn't noticed before because of the dim light.

I lifted the lid and parted the folds of the dress.

The cheap revolver had been tucked into the yellowed silk.

An odd place to keep a gun, but not proof. Not until the ballistics tests were done.

I really didn't have to wait to be sure.

Whether it would pay today to steal silk stockings, I had no idea. It had been five years since I'd bought a pair for my wife and those hadn't been stockings at all, but nylon panty hose. And I'd picked up the wrong shade, at that.

The world moved ever onward and upward.

We'd gone from things like suit boxes and attics to plastic garment bags and recreation rooms, from silk stockings to

nylon panty hose, to sleek cars instead of boxy ones, and to being a great deal slower to shoot suspicious people, advances which just might be fine and wonderful.

But the look of guilt couldn't be streamlined, plasticized, pre-packaged, coated for easy swallowing, polyurethaned for extra-long life, or paid for by credit card.

I carried the box like a tray downstairs to the living room, a puzzled Del Rio following, and placed it on the coffee table before the sofa where the husband sat with his face in his hands.

If he had indeed killed his wife, his expression when he saw the box would be exactly the same as the Bad Guy's when Coniglia had placed that suit box in front of him.

And probably no different from Cain's.

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FICTION

The Lamp Tree

by Ann F. Woodward



"Swimming against the current
The carp tires . . ."

Lady Aoi found only these short lines written on the golden red paper when she had untwisted the ends and straightened the many long folds. The handwriting was that of the empress and the lines were from an old poem, which went on to say that a friend came to swim alongside: in other words, this was a summons from the empress that Aoi should come to visit and keep her company for a while.

The messenger had been sent with a carriage, so sure had the empress been that Aoi would oblige her. The princess whom Aoi served as lady-in-waiting was about to depart for a visit to her father's house, and she agreed at once that Aoi should go and stay as long as she was needed. Before the timekeepers had called the next hour, Aoi was on her way to the detached palace to which the empress had moved for the duration of her pregnancy. Guards opened the gate, helped the carriage men unyoke the ox, and pulled the carriage right up to the dismounting steps so that Aoi would be sheltered from the weather. After several fine days, the mists of spring had returned and had for the moment thickened into rain.

Aoi had never liked this palace. All the woodwork inside was black with age, the paper on the sliding doors had not been freshened for years, and the bamboo blinds were dingy and splotched. Each time there was a move to redecorate, it seemed that some essential building within the main palace enclosure would burn and have to be replaced. Because it was mostly used as a temporary residence, this old detached palace was given low priority at the Office of Palace Repairs.

Even so, Aoi was surprised by the density of the gloom into which she was led by the maid who had come to meet her. The empress was resting and would send for Aoi when she awoke, the maid said.

Just as they were turning into the room where Aoi would sleep, a young lady-in-waiting approached from the far end of the corridor. Seeing Aoi, she came hurrying to greet her.

"I have been here the shortest time of any of these ladies, and so it is inappropriate that I should be the one to welcome you. Yet we have heard that you were coming and I know you by all the gracious things her majesty has said about you. Though it is by accident that I am the first to see you here, I will be bold and say that I am glad you have come."

Because they were making bows to each other, Aoi could not at first see the young woman's face. Her speech, though elaborately formal, was pleasant, and the long hair that swept several inches beyond her robes onto the floor was lustrous even in such darkness. The robes themselves were of green, yellow, and a particularly forward pink, and made of fabric that had been beaten and fulled to make it shine. When the young woman rose from her bow, Aoi saw that she was extravagantly pretty, her features rounded, her eyelids smooth and plump, her lips softly modeled.

"I am from the Province of Iga, not equal at all to the refined ladies raised in the capital who have been so kind as to admit me to their midst in service to the empress. I hope that you will excuse my many faults."

And then Aoi understood. This was the daughter of the man whose private troops were currently subduing the priests. Terrified by their almost daily raids into the city from the temples in the mountains, by riots and bloody fights, and by assaults on officials in their own residences, the prime minister had appealed to a member of a rival clan who kept a small army for the protection of his manor in the Province of Iga. The price of this military aid had been acceptance of his daughter as a lady-in-waiting to the empress.

Though her words were humble and modest and slightly touched with provincial accent, the young woman spoke with assurance: she was beautiful, daughter of a strong lord, candidate for the emperor's attention. And well aware of all this.

Aoi's servant, who had done the packing and followed in the princess's carriage, arrived just at this time, and the girl from Iga made a graceful departure. Almost before Aoi had been helped into a fresh robe and had her hair combed, a maid came with the empress's summons.

Inside the royal apartment there had been a few improvements in the furnishings, and charcoal in a round brazier glowed in the dimness. Yet it was a very dark room. No wonder we are all depressed during the misty days of spring, Aoi thought. The winter hangs on when all we want is to be warm and to open the rain doors and see new growth in the garden.

The empress, in her sixth month of pregnancy, seemed to Aoi somewhat more puffy in the face than would come from normal weight gain. Her greetings were warm and had a quality of relief, as she motioned Aoi to sit beside her. Besides Lady Iga there were

five ladies-in-waiting, all of whom Aoi knew, who kept her company. Almost before Aoi was settled on her cushion, Lady Iga was giving a flattering account of their meeting in the hall. She spoke almost entirely to her companions.

"And I said to myself, who could that be, that distinguished lady just arriving? The way she moved, the quiet elegance of her clothes, I knew she must be a person very much above me. I thought that it must be the famous Lady Aoi we have heard so much about, and I was quite thrilled to be the first to meet her. But very diffident, too, you know, being from such a country place." She leaned into the circle of the other ladies-in-waiting, conferring the confidence of her refined perceptions and exquisite reactions, and they leaned toward her, breathless and following every nuance of her expression. Though the words had been complimentary, Aoi felt uncomfortable. "Such a simple-seeming lady, I thought," the girl went on. "Can it be true she can do all those things we have heard about? Can this be the lady so often consulted by the great Minister of the Right, the one who knows—" she paused for emphasis "—Chinese medicine?" And she smiled in Aoi's direction.

Aoi began to feel that a little too much was being made of her own simplicity and definitely too little of the presence of the empress, whom the young woman had not yet addressed.

"Well, but," Aoi said, "I am simple in my intention to serve and distinguished only by acceptance of that service." And she turned to the empress, glancing back to catch a look of fury on Lady Iga's face.

The empress was amused. She touched the tip of her folded fan to Aoi's arm and spoke in a low voice. "Don't bother, she is not worth the trouble of your sharp comments," and, sighing, "She will not be here long, I think." The empress meant that it was only a matter of time before the girl attracted the emperor and was moved into his private residence as a concubine. Certainly her behavior was already entirely that of a rival. Looking again, Aoi saw that she was now whispering to the other ladies, their heads all bent together, little gusts of laughter rising and subsiding.

"Tell me," Aoi said to the empress, "is she the only child of that lord from Iga?"

"Only daughter, I think. Though . . ." The empress broke off to sigh again and shift her weight, "I have really paid no attention." She looked seriously at Aoi, her features blurred by worry and uncertainty. "How glad I am that you have come. I am not well."

She went on to confide strange twinges and Aoi, when she had heard it all—the ladies-in-waiting engaged all this time in discussing with Lady Iga the costume of a recent male visitor—felt that the empress was right to be concerned. But this agreement she did not betray, sitting listening and nodding for a long time. It was obvious that no one else knew of her symptoms or the palace would be in an uproar of prayer and exhortation of spirits. "These are only small things," the empress said. "I may be imagining them. But I need you here, you are so sensible."

"Well, I will do what I can." Aoi sincerely hoped that the troubles were imaginary because she could not risk sitting by while a real problem advanced in complication. As soon as she was sure of serious trouble, she must notify the emperor and let the traditional cures begin. This was a pregnancy of more than normal importance. Though several of the emperor's concubines had children of whom he was very fond, the empress herself had not yet given him an heir, which had been a source of anxiety for both of them for a long time. The empress had a history of missing the period of her monthly defilement a few times, then resuming it again. Since his wife had at last begun a well-established pregnancy, Aoi had heard that the emperor had somewhat given up his interest in other ladies, whether through superstition or increased affection, she did not know. But she was sure that the reason the empress was living in this dingy, detached palace instead of in her family's splendid main residence was that they wished not to attract bad luck by seeming to give much importance to the coming birth.

"How dull we are today!" Lady Iga said suddenly, turning away from the circle of ladies. "Can one write a poem of dullness?" Smiling around to enlist the others in her project, she gathered them with brilliant eyes and a small laugh of her own frivolity. The five other ladies all fluttered to bring her writing box to her, then to bring their own, making, as she did, great show of choosing bright paper—or dull paper, which should it be?—for their poems on boredom. "If I only had some of that lilac paper," Lady Iga was heard to say, and two of the others ran to another room to fetch it for her. From the midst of this flurry, sharp glances from Lady Iga struck out at the empress, who sat quietly with Aoi and did not fly to compete, as the others did.

"I see you do not find my idea appealing," Lady Iga said to the empress, suddenly elaborately contrite. "It is my failing that I must write verses," she lowered her eyes modestly, conscious of referring

to a line of Chinese poetry, "but, ah . . ." she sighed, then smiled, "I am no Li Po." The other ladies surrounded her, turning their backs on the empress in their enthusiasm for such graceful quotation. Only Lady Sanmi, looking puzzled, turned the other way, glancing first at her mistress and then, with a wry, questioning look, at Aoi. Aoi shook her head.

"At least she got the Po part right," said the empress into Aoi's ear. But she did not speak to Lady Iga nor did Aoi. The line quoted was not from Li Po but from Po Chu-i.

"Does she often make such mistakes?" Aoi kept her voice low.

"Oh, yes. She is half-right about many things. But usually it is only Lady Sanmi and I who catch her mistakes, and we are polite about it and do not correct her." She straightened and put one hand on the small of her back, which often stiffened late in the day. "So dazzling . . ." and she smiled at her old friend.

The poems, when they were finished, were all read for the empress to judge and all were judged equally good. Before the writing boxes had been put away, the shuffling and bumps of the maids bringing dinner were heard in the ante-room, and one more dull, cloudy day was almost past. As the ladies brought in the first trays, the sun briefly lit the eastern wall.

In the evening, the emperor came for one of his short visits. He had been out after the rain in the royal park, flying his hawks. "I was there at sunset," he said, "and as the sun went down, it shone through a pine tree, making it dark against the red sky. Seeing that tree shape, I thought of a thing that may cheer you, and I have brought it along." He motioned to one of his attendants, and a tall box draped in silk was brought to him, set with ceremony on the bare floor, uncovered, opened, and the inner padding carefully removed.

The ladies-in-waiting sat very still as the men lifted out a branched golden tree. Lady Iga, as usual, gave their feelings intense expression. "... No thought that my eyes would ever see ..." she was heard to breathe. Aoi supposed that she was again quoting but, since she herself knew no such line, she suspected complete invention. Still, it was an apt and complimentary thing to say and it attracted the emperor's attention. Squinting his eyes, which were troubling him again, he looked for the speaker, recognized her as the daughter of the provincial lord, and raised his eyebrows in surprise. This caused Lady Iga to hold up her fan, but just too late to hide her smile.

It was a lamp tree the emperor had unpacked. Rooted in a stand of enameled grass and flowers, the trunk stood straight up and ended in a little finial of gold. The branches sprang from all sides, twisting with realistic grace all about it, longer at the bottom and tapering toward the top. Each branch ended in a spoon-shaped oval golden basin with a wick coiled in it and threaded through a tiny ring at the very tip. Gold leaf wrapped the branches, and clusters of delicate green jade leaves frothed along them.

"Now then." The emperor, conscious of the enthralled attention of Lady Iga and her friends, began to explain. "I know it is only at the New Year that we use this kind of thing, but—" he looked kindly at the empress—"special circumstances require special means. And you have been so burdened lately."

The empress only looked more uncomfortable, not pleased to have her condition referred to in this way, especially since she did not want her husband to know that she was unwell and secretly feared that her child might not survive its full term.

Though he did not rise from his cushion on the floor, the emperor bustled in his movements as he motioned for oil from the bottle one of his men had brought, supervised the pouring of a small amount into each cup, asked that a taper be ignited in the brazier, and himself took it to light each wick. The little tree blazed, throwing shadows and light onto the floor about it, dimming every other aspect of the room.

Aoi was surprised to hear the empress murmur, "Gaudy thing!" Looking more carefully, she could see that the gold was carelessly applied, the jade of the leaves only painted paper, and that there was really no fine workmanship in it. How had such a cheap article come to be in the palace storehouse? It must have been through some long-forgotten matter of tact or policy that it had been accepted as valuable. The emperor, with his poor eyesight, could not see it well, she thought, or he would know its true quality.

"Now this," the emperor said, making further explanation to the ladies, "is a treasure from China, brought back as a gift by the last envoys long ago. In Ch'ang-an in the very old days the streets were lined with great tall lamp trees at the time of the full moon after the New Year. Families vied with one another to have the brightest one and they said they meant to outshine the moon itself. This is a mere replica, a souvenir miniature. We sometimes take it from the storeroom, if we remember, and light it at the proper time. But think what a sight it must have been, to see a whole city illuminated."

The ladies, imagining the wonderful city of Ch'ang-an at the time of the festival of light, were silent with awe. Only Lady Sanmi was not bemused, an attitude she hastily corrected when she saw that Aoi had observed it. Lady Sanmi was of the Tachibana clan, and her father, like many of the Tachibanas, was a student of Chinese literature.

"I suppose that lamp trees are not entirely a novelty to Lady Sanmi," Aoi said, meaning the comment for the empress alone but, because of the silence of the others, heard by all. She instantly regretted the remark because Lady Iga turned on Lady Sanmi and said with passion and venom, "You mean you have seen such a thing before?"

Lady Sanmi, though admired for the grace of her conversation, her beautiful calligraphy, and her readiness with apt quotation, was not physically attractive. Until now she had been as avid a member of Lady Iga's troop of ladies as any other, flattered as they all were by her confidence and private jokes. But the recent mistake in quotation—added, Aoi was sure, to many that had gone before—and now this intense admiration of what was really a cheap miniature lamp tree seemed to have shredded her patience. Lady Sanmi flushed and hid her face behind her sleeve. "It is just that I have read . . . That is, I have heard . . . That is, they were as tall as two men and . . ."

"I didn't know we had an *educated* woman here," said Lady Iga, laughing again and leaning toward the others in such a way as to exclude Lady Sanmi.

The empress, moving away from the armrest that had supported her left elbow and in this way taking attention to herself, said to her husband, "How kind you are to bring us such a beautiful gift. It is just what is needed to cheer us up."

"Oh, no, I am sorry to say I can only lend it to you for a while. It is official treasure and must go back to the Bureau of Storehouses. Even emperors cannot dispose of some things," and he smiled comfortably.

Lady Sanmi joined the others in expressing thanks, though she still kept her sleeve raised. Aoi, who was often criticized for her unwomanly knowledge of Chinese, blamed herself for exposing Lady Sanmi.

During the next few days Lady Sanmi was made a party of one by Lady Iga and her admirers. Subtle though it was, both Aoi and the empress saw the conferences she was left out of, the groupings around Lady Iga that left Lady Sanmi to sit alone, and the occa-

sional sharp questions for verification of the least classical reference. The empress compensated when she could by drawing the plain young woman into her talk with Aoi, but while she spoke of her longing for the wisteria to bloom, or while Aoi told of a perfume contest the princess had organized, Lady Sanmi would sit and watch the group around Lady Iga.

Each evening the lamp tree was lit. "It is only a small replica, you know," Lady Iga would say, as if she had been the first to mention this, "but it is the emperor's treasure and we should use it." Though she spoke of it in this slighting way, she was not able to hide her fascination once it was burning. The other ladies always handed her the taper so that she could light it herself. A great deal of bother was involved in attending it: the bowls must be filled and the oil often spilled; the wicks must be pulled out to the proper length, and smudges of charred linen often got on the sleeves of the servants or the burnt ends broke off and fell to the floor, to turn up later as black marks on someone's dress. After a few days, the maids neglected to return it to its box and dust collected on the many branches.

At the beginning of the fourth month, just when the weather was turning clear and warm, the empress felt definite pain in her womb and was put to bed. There was no help for it now, priests were called and prayers and spells echoed through the small palace night and day. Aoi insisted on thick curtains to surround the suffering empress and stayed with her inside this private space continuously. The emperor, alarmed, issued an edict that all temples should make special prayers.

One day as he rode out to Kiyomizu Temple, he asked his attendants about two buildings just to the south of the palace ground. "Those are the prisons, my lord," they said, and he sent for the warders and made a special amnesty, releasing all the prisoners. Though it was understood that by this kind action he hoped to influence fate in the matter of his wife's child, he was much criticized for turning loose thieves and murderers at a time when there was already so much trouble in the city.

The empress improved and Aoi was finally able to rest. Though Lady Iga had left for her monthly visit to her uncle in the city, the other ladies took turns sitting with their mistress and receiving the constant notes, letters, and visitors.

A few days after the amnesty, as if to justify all the objections, the detached palace itself was robbed. The stolen item was the

lamp tree. During the concern for the empress and all the confusion of that time, it had no longer been in regular use; in fact there was not a maid or lady-in-waiting who could remember where or when it had last been seen. The empress, who was still kept in her bed but was out of danger, asked that the palace guards not make a great fuss of looking for the thief. Yet she could not come right out and say that the lamp tree had been a worthless thing. The small palace had been entered illegally, and the robbers had been a potential threat to the empress and her women. This idea inflamed the emperor, and he ordered the men to search everywhere.

The first clue was discovered in Lady Sanmi's room. There was lamp oil on one of her robes and, though they did not find the lamp tree itself, the gold finial was wedged into a crack in the straw mat she usually sat on by her brazier. They were threatening to send her home in disgrace to her family when Aoi heard about it and asked to speak to the girl in private. The men left the room and the lady who shared it with Lady Sanmi went to the empress's quarters, leaving the two of them behind the curtain screen.

"This is ridiculous, you of all people would never have taken such a thing as that lamp tree," Aoi said, and the girl nodded, her face streaked with tears, her hair matted against her cheeks. Aoi put on an air of impatience. "Make yourself calm, this is a time to think and I have been thinking about lamp trees. I know something about them from my reading," and she nodded when the girl looked at her in surprise. All serious writing was in Chinese, a language for men. But Aoi's father had taught her as he would have taught a son, if he had had one. This access to classical knowledge was the source of Aoi's skill in medicine, and the learning of it had honed her intelligence. "Now let us put together what we know. In the later days of lamp trees, they were made of bamboo, isn't that right?"

The girl nodded. "And made new each year," she said.

"Yes," said Aoi. "Why was that, do you think?"

"I have never thought about it."

"Think now. Didn't the season for lamp trees end with 'sending flowers to the moon'?"

"Yes, I have read that phrase. What does it mean?"

"You have perhaps read also the phrase 'peach petals rising'? I think it means . . . " and Aoi whispered into Lady Sanmi's ear.

Leaving the girl's room, Aoi found a captain of the guards whom she knew and explained where he should go and what he should

look for to discover who had stolen the emperor's lamp tree.

In a southern ward of the city, rain dripped from the thick sedge roofs of a large mansion. It was the deepest part of the night, quiet, dark, windless. The robbery at the detached palace had alarmed all the aristocracy and the guards were alert—meeting on their rounds, stopping to talk, then parting again, holding their bows in front of them, ready to thrum the danger signal on the bow-strings should they see anything suspicious.

Suddenly there was a high-pitched explosion and flames burst from a room in the western wing. The roof was pierced and began to burn.

Thrumming loudly, calling to each other, the guards ran in that direction. All they found in the room was a mess of scattered bits of gold paper, green leaves, and little spoon-shaped golden bowls whose spilled oil was burning out along the floor. The ceiling of the room had a black hole in it, and fire was spreading in the sedge of the roof beyond. The occupant of the room had fled and was never publicly identified.

This event, though not observed directly by the empress's guards, was widely reported in the neighborhood. The mansion was the house of Lady Iga's uncle.

Lady Iga did not appear again in the empress's service, in fact she did not appear again outside the Province of Iga. It was said that her father was extremely wrathful at about this time. The story Aoi told was the one source of amusement for the empress, whose health continued to be a serious problem. She wanted to know the process of Aoi's deductions.

"How did you know Lady Sanmi hadn't taken it?" the empress asked Aoi. "After all, they found . . . things . . . in her room." Emperresses need not bother to specify details.

"Yes, there was oil on one of her robes. Though I think in this case it was put there deliberately, actually that could have happened to any of us who had been near the lamp tree. But they also found the gold finial from its tip, and that was much more suspicious."

"And yet you knew she should not have been accused."

"Lady Sanmi and you and I were the ones who saw beyond the cheap flash of that little thing. Why should Lady Sanmi have wanted it?"

The empress sat thinking, then she said, "That finial, I didn't realize it could be removed."

"Nor did I. But it was thinking of the lamp tree without its tip that made me remember something important about the Chinese celebrations, which was the phrase 'sending flowers to the moon.' There was a term 'peach flowers.' It meant fireworks."

"You mean that was . . . Well, I am sorry, but what was there? I cannot imagine."

"The central trunk of the lamp tree was a rocket, and the wick for it was hidden under the little cap, the finial. This wick would have been lit only on the last day of the festival, because the explosion of the rockets destroyed the lamp trees, which were for that reason very cheaply made. When she saw that extra wick, Lady Iga lit it also. And she must have been greatly surprised at the result."

The empress began to laugh in her quiet way. But she soon sobered. "I have no proper pity for her. Such covetousness, such spite."

"Yes."

The empress sat for a while, concentrating inwardly. She still had no real belief in a happy outcome for her pregnancy and her face did not show the relief she expressed in a poem.

"Shocking and final
Disaster to a lamp tree
Is merely flashing
Incident of night time to
The moon, secure at great height."

Aoi thought of phrasing an answering poem, but decided she preferred to let the comforting thought of high security vibrate for a while between them.

FICTION

An Ounce of Prevention

by B. K. Stevens



“It’s a charming, cosy apartment,” Mr. Sondergaard said, unlocking the door. The flatness of his tone undercut the warmth of his words. Either he’d given the speech too often to find it interesting, or he wasn’t convinced of the charm and cosiness he described. “One bedroom, good-sized living room, kitchen with brand-name appliances, bathroom with shower stall but no tub. Tasteful, modern furniture. Long-term or short-term lease available, with option to renew.”

“Short-term,” Dan Ledger said, too sharply. “And I won’t want to renew. Three months will be plenty.”

Mr. Sondergaard looked him over knowingly, focusing on his wedding ring. “It’s a nice place,” he remarked, “but maybe a little snug for a family.”

Damn, Ledger thought. Is it that obvious? “I’d be living here alone,” he said.

Mr. Sondergaard nodded. “Divorce, right?”

“No. Just a separation.” Ledger walked past him into the kitchen. “Strictly temporary. So. Brand-name appliances, you say?”

Beyond having a comfortably familiar sound, the brand names meant nothing to him. I ought to examine the appliances, he thought, and so he counted the

burners on the stove and checked the freezer for ice cube trays. Four burners, two trays. The appliances seemed satisfactory.

He wandered into the living room. The bright blue vinyl couch was probably as uncomfortable as it was ugly, but the rest of the furniture looked appropriately bland. He glanced into the bedroom without entering it and gave the bathroom only a glimpse.

“How soon could I move in?” he asked.

“Tomorrow, if you want,” Mr. Sondergaard said, shrugging. “Soon as I can call the bank, make sure your check’s all right. And since you’re a policeman, I’m sure that won’t be a problem. As far as the apartment’s concerned, it’s all cleaned up and ready for you right now.”

That figures, Ledger thought bitterly. Janet wouldn’t have put it on the list unless he could move in immediately. When he had come home from work tonight, she had greeted him with packed suitcases, stacks of boxes containing half their kitchen supplies and linens, and a crisp, typed sheet of paper, single-spaced, tersely describing four apartments she had researched and deemed suitable. She had suggested he make his selection promptly. He had complied. This was the first

apartment on the list.

"All right," he said. "I'll move in tomorrow."

"That's fine. Short-term lease, you said? The landlord guarantees no rent increase the first time you renew. After that, no guarantees."

"I won't want to renew." He walked over to the living room window and gazed into the alley below. Dark and narrow, but no loose garbage. As good as could be expected. "Sort of an old fashioned fire escape, isn't it?"

"Perfectly sturdy. And it gives you a little balcony, almost. Not wide enough for a chair, but you can put plants on it. That's what Mrs. Hatton does. She's the lady next door, the one who shares the balcony with you. Real nice lady. You should get along fine."

"That's nice," Ledger said absent-mindedly. Would it be best to seem casual when he told Janet about the apartment? Or should he sound mildly reproachful, even hurt? Should he make the lack of a tub seem pathetic?

"Yes, you two should have plenty to talk about," Mr. Sondergaard was saying. He lowered his voice confidentially. "Her husband left her three months ago, you know. And you'll never guess where he went."

"Probably not," Ledger admitted. I won't sign the lease tonight, he decided. Janet may feel guilty about the tub and change her mind.

Mr. Sondergaard grinned triumphantly. "He went right here. Moved in with the last tenant, Mrs. Kirby, and they lived here together almost three months—right next door to his wife. How would you like *that*?"

"Not much," Ledger said, taking an interest in the story for the first time. "I bet things got pretty tense around here."

"Not as bad as you'd think. And that's thanks to Mrs. Hatton. She's a real cheerful type. Never let her troubles get her down, never made things hard for her husband and Mrs. Kirby. Never even stopped speaking to them, in fact. You couldn't ask for a nicer neighbor." He took Ledger by the arm. "Come on. We'll see if she's home, and I'll introduce you."

"I haven't got time," Ledger protested, but allowed himself to be led next door, curious to meet this most tolerant of wives.

She was at home, a tall, almost striking woman in her late forties, with short brown hair sensibly curled. She shook Ledger's hand warmly, said she was sure he'd like the apartment, and offered to help him unpack.

"He's a policeman," Mr. Son-

dergaard supplied. "A lieutenant, no less. That'll give you a secure feeling, won't it, having him right next door? And you two have a lot in common. He's getting divorced, too."

"Separated," Ledger said hastily. "Only separated. Strictly temporary."

Mrs. Hatton's face filled with compassion, but she managed an encouraging smile. "That's the spirit. Keep right on hopping. Who knows what could happen. Well, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'll bring over a casserole for your dinner tomorrow."

His last night at home made him think longingly of Mrs. Hatton and her casserole. Janet wasn't at all sympathetic about the tub. As she pointed out, he always showered anyway, so what did it matter? Yes, he could have the stereo—most of the records were his, so that made sense. She would have it delivered to his apartment tomorrow morning, along with the suitcases and boxes. Was there anything else he needed?

No, Ledger said bleakly. Nothing else at all.

He read his daughter a story about an annoyingly optimistic little engine, put her to bed, and tried to draw her into a conversation about the separation.

She didn't seem especially interested. It isn't real to her yet, he decided. In a day or so, when she realizes that I'm actually not coming home, she'll be upset. So he went downstairs and packed his records while Janet read a self-help book about taking charge and actualizing potentials. When she finally closed the book, he offered to spend the night on the couch. That, she said, was silly. After all, they'd slept in the same bed for ten years. One more night, certainly wouldn't kill her.

It might kill me, though, he thought, imagining what it would be like to lie in their bed all night while Janet, always so rigorously fair, kept primly to her own side. He stayed downstairs, watching Johnny Carson and listening to her move about overhead. She's showering now, he thought; she's checking on Amy; now, she's in bed. He stayed awake through Letterman, then purposely fell asleep sitting up, the television still on. In the morning, he was stiff and exhausted and filled with angry desolation. Only unrelenting habit kept him from making a scene at breakfast, from swearing at Janet and cursing her chronically undercooked eggs and putting his fist through the storm door on his way out. How on earth, he wondered, did Mrs. Hatton stay so

reasonable and sweet-tempered?

He left work early, determined to put the ordeal of unpacking behind him. When he unlocked his new door for the first time and saw the stacked boxes that, in Janet's view, constituted his share of their ten years together, he was numbed by depression. What was he doing in this sterile, carefully packaged place, remote from the life he had built? He allowed two minutes for grief and self-pity, then resigned himself to the tasks at hand. There was so much to do—putting his clothes into unfamiliar drawers and closets, making the strangely narrow bed, setting up the kitchen. First things first, he decided, and began unpacking his stereo.

Shortly after five, he heard a knock and opened his door, to see Mrs. Hatton standing in the hall, smiling, wearing an inexpensive gray suit that unambiguously proclaimed her a secretary, holding the promised casserole. "Chicken and noodles and cheese," she said. "No vegetables. I figured that on a night like this, you should be excused from vegetables."

She deposited the casserole in his oven, set the temperature control and the timer, and strolled into the living room. "Now, how can I help?" She

paused delicately. "In the bedroom, perhaps. Where are your sheets?"

There was, he realized, nothing flirtatious about the suggestion. It was sisterly, an acknowledgement of the wretchedness of this particular task and a desire to shield him from it. Gratefully, he handed her the sheets.

When the timer went off, he invited her to stay for dinner, and she accepted. "I can't linger, though," she said. "My husband and Brenda Kirby are coming over at eight, for dessert and drinks."

"Dessert and drinks?" he echoed incredulously. "You're entertaining them? You're *baking* for them?"

She shrugged. "Grant was the most important person in my life for two solid decades, and Brenda was my neighbor for six years. I don't want to lose touch with them." She smiled suddenly, a warm, self-mocking smile. "Well, maybe I wouldn't mind losing touch with *her*. But not with him."

"Even so," he said, and shook his head.

"You think I should have more pride?" she asked, still smiling. "I do have a little. I've also invited a man I know from work. He isn't really a romantic interest, but I'm hoping they'll think he is. That's for my pride,

you see. I don't want to look pitiful. But I also don't believe in holding a grudge. There's no point."

He spooned more casserole onto his plate. "You're a wonderful cook, Mrs. Hatton," he said. "And you're a hell of a lot more forgiving than I am."

"Call me Gail." She looked at him shrewdly. "Something tells me this separation was your wife's idea, not yours. Is there another man?"

He nodded. "In Columbus. He's just a friend, she says, and I believe her—but I'm betting he'll be promoted now that I'm out of the house. And she says he isn't the main reason. She says the marriage is stale, she's not challenged any more, there's no spark, she needs to start growing again."

"Crap?" Gail suggested kindly.

"That's how it sounds to me. But for a long time, things haven't been good. I can't deny that." He wished he had remembered to buy liquor. "How about you, Gail? How did it happen?"

She sighed. "Nothing very original. Brenda's third husband left her, and she needed a new man to salvage her ego. Grant was right next door. Why keep shopping? And he was restless—male menopause, something like that. A stage."

She picked up her plate. "I'd better go. I want to straighten up before they come. If you need anything, just knock."

She was the one who knocked, however, a few minutes before eight. "I hate to ask this of you," she said. "I know it's awkward, but I'm in a bind. My friend from work just called. He can't make it tonight, so I was wondering if you—well, could you please come instead? I'm sorry. It's such an imposition. It's just that I told them I was having a male friend over, and I don't want to make excuses, and to look ridiculous, and—"

"It's all right," he cut in. The bond of sympathy was already firm. "I just happen to be free tonight."

Brenda Kirby, only marginally younger and more attractive than Gail Hatton, was a wiry, quick-eyed blonde with high cheekbones and a low neckline. She lapped up her martini and gazed at Ledger coquettishly.

"So you moved into my old place today? How nice. I know you'll love it. It's real cute. You and Gail just met, then?"

"No, we'd met before I moved in." And that, Ledger assured himself, was perfectly true. They'd met the night before. Determined to play his part well, he draped an arm around

Gail's shoulder. "In fact, cute as the place may be, that isn't why I picked it. I guess you could say I like the neighbor even more than the apartment." You could certainly say that, he thought, since I don't like the apartment at all.

"How cosy," Brenda said, scowling. "And what do you do for a living?"

"He works for the city," Gail said, and whisked away her glass. "Dan, could you freshen Brenda's drink? You know where I keep the liquor."

"Sure." He took the glass and hid a smile. Just ten minutes ago, when Gail had fixed the first round, he'd seen where she kept the liquor. And if she wanted to make him sound like some pencil-pushing bureaucrat, if she thought that sounded better than admitting he was a mere policeman, fine.

"What about the Waterford goblets, Gail?" Grant Hatton asked impatiently. He was a stocky, balding man with a perpetually moist forehead.

"I've packed them up already," Gail replied serenely. "You can take them with you tonight."

"Oh, good," Brenda said. "That's so sensible, Gail. After all, you hardly ever use them and we'll be entertaining a lot. And the brass candlesticks?"

"Well, I don't know," Gail said hesitantly. "I'm rather fond

of them. I've had them so long, you know. They were a wedding gift."

"Let her keep them," Grant Hatton cut in. "We don't need them."

"But I *like* them," Brenda objected. "And they were a gift from *your* aunt. You have more of a right to them than she does."

Gail smiled graciously and stood up. "Fine. I'll go get them."

"And close the windows while you're up, will you?" Brenda asked, shivering delicately. "There's a horrible draft in here."

"That's called fresh air, Brenda." Gail paused by the window and inhaled deeply. "It's good for you. I always leave this window open all night, once spring comes."

"It isn't spring," Brenda insisted. "It's March. And it's *cold*."

Gail smiled but walked past the window without closing it. "Perhaps if you covered up more, dear. *You* like fresh air, don't you, Dan?"

"Love it," Ledger declared loyally. "Wouldn't go to bed without a window open." God, he thought, how does she stay so calm? In her place, I'd want to open the window wider and pitch Brenda Kirby right through it.

"Can we please get back to business?" Grant Hatton asked,

dabbing at his brow with a soggy Kleenex. "What else do you want, honey?"

Brenda pursed her lips and surveyed the room critically. "Well, there's the parson's table. And the roll-top desk, of course. And the rocking chair, and the hassock, and the little bookcase. I think that's all."

"Oh, my." Gail sank onto the couch. "That certainly is all. That's every piece of furniture I own, Brenda."

"That's just the point," Brenda said firmly. "You've got a furnished apartment. These other pieces you've stuck in just clutter the place up. But Grant and I have a big, empty house." She turned to Ledger. "Grant bought me a darling three-bedroom ranch. We've both had it with apartments. But now we have to furnish it, and we're counting on Gail to help."

Grant looked profoundly uncomfortable. "But we don't have to strip her bare. Let her keep the rocker, at least. It's her favorite chair."

"But I *like* it." Brenda's eyes turned icy. "And we might need it. We might have a family. And since that's obviously out of the question for Gail now, it's stupid for her to cling to a rocking chair."

"Take it," Gail Hatton said. She looked dazed, and Ledger ached for her. "Take everything. I don't care."

"Good," Brenda said briskly. "We'll take the jade, too."

"Damn it, Brenda," Grant Hatton snapped, "I told you not to mention the jade tonight."

"But I *want* to." She turned to Gail and spoke in a reproachful, teacherly tone. "Now, Gail, you know you have no right to the jade. It's been in Grant's family for three generations. It's always given to the oldest son's wife, and since I'm going to be Grant's wife now, it belongs to me."

"No," Gail said, and Ledger was startled by the new harshness in her voice. "The jade's mine. Grant's mother willed it to me, and I've owned it for twelve years. It was never in Grant's possession at all. He has no claim on it, and I'm not giving it up."

"That's just plain selfish," Brenda shot back. "Selfish, and stupid. Why do you need expensive jewelry? When would you wear it? To a National Secretaries' Week brunch?"

"Maybe," Gail said defiantly. "Or maybe I'll sell it. I had it appraised last week, and it's worth over two thousand dollars. Well, that's my security. Grant took our savings, and it's hard for me to manage on just my salary. I could use some extra cash."

"Don't you dare sell it," Grant said, jabbing a finger in the air furiously. "That jade belonged

to my great-grandmother. Do you think I want the set broken up? Do you think I want some stranger to get it?"

"Maybe I don't care what you want." Gail stood up and started pacing, folding her arms across her chest and running her hands along them nervously. "Do you care about what you've done to me? Do you care that I can't get to sleep without drugs any more? Do you care that I have to take sleeping pills every night, that half the time I'm late to work in the morning because I'm so drugged up that I sleep right through the alarm clock?"

"That's not my fault," Grant Hatton said. But he looked stricken.

"No?" She stopped pacing and stood in front of him. "Then it's not my fault if your precious jade gets sold to strangers. And don't get any ideas about sneaking in here and snatching it. This is the last night it stays in my bedroom bureau. Tomorrow morning, I'm taking it to the bank and putting it in my safe deposit box. You'll never see that jade again."

There was a terrible silence. Pensively, Ledger sloshed the bourbon in his glass. He thought about Janet, about the man in Columbus, about the hollow misery he'd felt this morning. He finished his drink quickly. "I'm going to the bank tomorrow, too," he said. "When my

wife kicked me out, I emptied our savings account, before she could get her claws into it. But I'm nervous about keeping all that cash in an envelope tucked under my mattress. I'll have to open my own account. Right now, though, I'd better get to the office."

"To the office?" Brenda asked, astonished. "At this hour?"

"Afraid so," Ledger said, standing up. "What with the separation and all, I've fallen way behind on my paper work. I can always catch a nap on the couch at my office." He grinned sheepishly. "Spending the night there got to be sort of a habit when my wife and I started having problems. Well, nice meeting you two. Hope I see you again soon."

"I hope so," Brenda Kirby said, and gazed at him thoughtfully as she shook his hand.

Four hours later, Ledger sat in a corner of his cold, dark living room, shuddering as the March wind rushed in through the open window. He looked at his watch. One o'clock. I'm missing Leterman, he thought. This had better be worth it.

He heard a creak, then a thud, then a hesitant clicking. Good, he thought. Mine first. That makes it easier, and safer. He stood up, pressed his back against the wall, and took out

"Why, yes—that is, not exactly," she said, taken aback. "What are you doing here? I thought you were spending the night at your office."

"Brenda Kirby thought so, too," he said, walking past her. "But I stayed home. Lucky thing for her. Even luckier for you. May I use your telephone? She just tried to burglarize my apartment."

"Your apartment? But I thought she'd—oh." She stopped abruptly. "I don't understand."

"No, you probably don't. You were so intent on setting your own trap that you didn't realize mine was even more attractive—her old apartment, no one home, cash under the mattress. Just the thing she needed to boost her confidence before breaking in here. And what would have happened then?" He strode into her bedroom, opened the drawer in the bedside stand, and found nothing. Then he pulled back the pillow and picked up the Colt .25. He held it out to her. "What sort of reception had you planned for her, Gail?"

"None," Gail managed, turning pale. "I never imagined—"

"Didn't you?" he demanded. "You gave her quite an invitation. The open window, the sleeping pills—you made it sound so easy. And so tempting. You were careful to let her

know just where the jade is and just how much it's worth, and to say tonight would be her last chance to get it. You knew she's too greedy and envious to resist bait like that. And, since she had lived next door, of course she'd know about the fire escape. But you didn't want her to know I'm a cop, did you? That might have scared her off, so you said I worked for the city. Just a harmless civil servant, right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, not able to lift her eyes from the floor.

"Don't give me that." He put his hands on her shoulders and made her look at him. "I know how it feels. That is, I know part of it. I know how it feels to be put aside, to have your life ripped away from you. But I don't know how it feels to live next door to your rival, to see her with your husband every day, to have him spend your life's savings to buy her the house you never had. Maybe, if I'd felt all that, I would have thought about murder, too. But it isn't worth it, Gail. Even if we couldn't prosecute you for shooting a burglar, you would have punished yourself. You would have had no peace for the rest of your life."

She was weeping now. "He was just going through a stage.

his gun. Straining through the darkness, he could see his window screen being snipped away. He waited until the screen was folded back, until the small, black-clad figure slid in and tiptoed steadily into his bedroom.

He waited ten seconds, then followed silently and switched on the bedroom light. "You're under arrest, Mrs. Kirby," he said. "Please don't move. I'm a policeman, and I have a gun."

She was crouched on the floor, one hand crammed under his mattress. At his words, her back went rigid, and she twisted her face toward him in disbelief. "No!" she cried. "You can't be a cop! You work for the city!"

"Most cops do," he said evenly. "Later, if you like, I'll show you my badge. Right now, I'm reading you your rights. Shut up and listen."

She was trembling by the time he finished. "It isn't fair," she said. "You were going to spend the night at your office. You promised."

"Too tired." He took out his handcuffs. "I fell asleep in my living room, in fact, until you broke in and woke me up. On your feet, please."

She obeyed reluctantly, making her eyes pathetic. "Please, Dan. Don't arrest me. I've never done anything like this before. But you mentioned that cash, and it costs so much to furnish a house, and I lost my head.

And I'm real, real sorry. Can't I make it up to you? I'd do anything." She fluttered her lashes longingly. "I mean, I think you're awful cute, and the bed's right here, and—well, what do you say?"

"I'd say you just attempted to bribe an officer. Better remember your right to remain silent, Mrs. Kirby, before you commit any more crimes." He gave her a light shove, sat her down in a sagging straightbacked chair, and handcuffed her to it. "You wait here. My telephone isn't installed yet, so I'll have to go next door to call for a squad car."

"Not to Gail's apartment?" she asked, horrified. "You won't tell her about this?"

"She'll read about it in the newspaper anyway. Everyone will. Including Grant. And at your trial, he'll hear the whole story. Including the part about the bribe you just offered me."

"Oh, no," Brenda moaned, lifting almost-tearful eyes to meet his. "Please, Dan. Can't you give me a break?"

"I've already given you a break," he said grimly. "You'll never know how big a break."

Gail Hatton responded to his knock with surprising speed. "You don't look drugged up to me," he commented dryly. "Forget to take your sleeping pill?"

Mid-life crisis, that's all it was. And she threw herself at him. If I could get rid of her, he'd come back to me."

She looked so sad, and so old, that he almost wished he'd allowed her the pleasure of shooting Brenda Kirby. "I'm not sure," he said gently. "I think he's no good. But we'll find out. At least he'll have to see her for what she is now. He'll have to realize that she was going to break in here next, and that she must have planned to fence the jade—she couldn't very well wear stolen jewelry. Maybe he'll dump her. If not, he isn't worth having."

She rubbed at her eyes. "That's easy for you to say."

"No. It's very hard for me to say, actually." He sighed briefly. "I'll tell you what. I have to go to the station for an hour or so. When I come back, we'll get good and drunk. We'll drink all night. And we'll talk. We won't be gracious, we won't be good sports, we won't keep stiff upper lips. You'll tell me what a louse your husband is, I'll call my wife every dirty name I can

think of, and we'll both get through this thing without resorting to murder. All right?"

"All right." But it was a grudging, joyless agreement. "So you lured her to your apartment to keep her from coming here? And then she got away?"

"Nope." He picked up the receiver and started to dial. "I caught her red-handed, stealing an envelope that contains all of seventeen dollars. So maybe it isn't really my life's savings. It was the best I could do on short notice. Anyway, she's next door, handcuffed to a chair."

"Handcuffed?" Some of the cheerfulness came back to her eyes. "Brenda Kirby, handcuffed to a chair. And will she go to jail?"

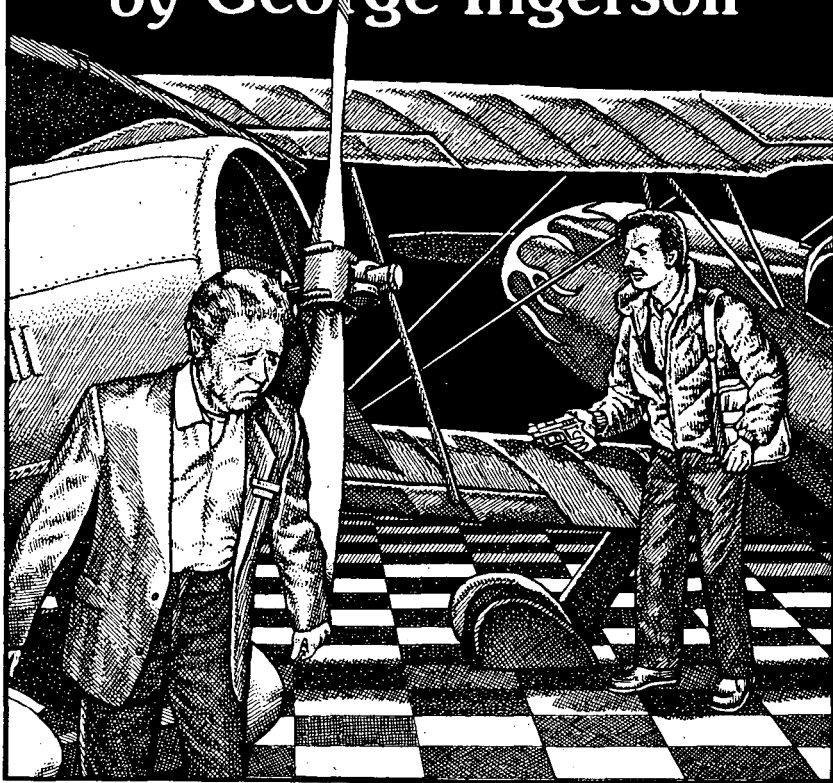
"For breaking into a cop's apartment? You bet she will." He grinned at her. "That's something, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes!" She smiled freely now, the warm, open smile that had so charmed him before. "Handcuffs and jail! Thank you, Dan. It isn't as good as killing her, but it's nice. It's enough."

FICTION

Bird Colonel

by George Ingersoll



The middle-aged trijet climbed out of Miami, then turned north. The captain was thinking more about the turbulence in the airline industry than the slight turbulence which kept him from switching off the seatbelt signs; he wondered whether his partnership in the auto agency would carry him through if the airline went belly-up. The young man across in the right-hand seat handled the radio traffic in his Yeager-imitation voice, and split

his time between speculation about the aft-cabin stew and wondering whether the captain would give him the next landing. The aft-cabin stew was wondering if they'd *ever* turn off the damn seat-belt signs so she could get on with serving drinks and dinner. Half the passengers were terrified and half were bored. A routine flight.

They landed, then departed, Washington National on time. Among the tourist passengers boarding in Washington was an ordinary looking young man in a quilted ski jacket and Survivor boots, carrying a green tote bag with a Boston Celtics logo. He took a seat well aft and shoved the bag under it. He blended quite easily with the half of the passengers not wearing three-piece suits and carrying attaché cases. When the flight was trimmed out at cruising altitude and all was serene, he casually made his way aft to the starboard restroom and latched himself in.

He took a dime from his pocket, knelt on the slightly-vibrating deck, and fitted the dime into the slot of one of the quarter-turn fasteners that secured a stainless steel access panel covering some of the plumbing under the compartment's only seat. In a few seconds the panel came loose and he peered into the mass of tubing, using a pencil flashlight. He reached in and removed a wad of plastic foam wedged among the tubes, unfolded it, and regarded with mild approval a 9mm automatic pistol. He checked the clip, assured himself that the chamber was empty, then dropped it into his right pocket. They check you going in, he thought, but not going out.

He reached back into the plumbing and withdrew five heavy-gauge self-sealing plastic bags and a chamois pouch, its drawstring closure backstopped with tape. He opened each bag, moistened a fingertip, and gingerly tasted the contents, then rinsed his mouth at the minuscule sink. He nodded. So far, so good. The bags were stowed in zippered compartments sewn into the lining of his jacket. The chamois pouch remained.

He extracted a jeweler's loupe from an inner pocket, screwed it into his right eye, and pulled the tape from the mouth of the pouch. Carefully, so as to avoid spillage in the slightly bouncing compartment, he poured a shining green stone into his palm, grasped it, and re-closed the pouch. He examined it with the loupe and pencil flash, noting the flawless dark green transparency and the perfect match of the facets. A high-grade emerald; at least two carats, and professionally cut, not flawed Mideast native-cut junk fit only to fool tourists. South America produces wealth in many

forms, he thought, if you can just get it in. He nodded again; his Miami associates had done their part. He buttoned up the access panel and resumed his seat in the cabin. It would be dark by the time they landed.

Upon arrival, he allowed most of the passengers to precede him through the forward door and up the covered ramp they still persisted in calling a "jetway." He fell in behind a heavyset man and, nearing the terminal entrance, looked carefully at the waiting throng. He saw three faces he recognized, and didn't wish to see. They were well separated in the crowd, all positioned for an unobstructed view of the deplaning passengers. And when two of the three narcs locked eyes with him, he knew that he, too, had been recognized. Perhaps his Miami associates hadn't done quite as well as he'd thought.

He spun and loped back down the jetway to the aircraft, thrusting his way through the few remaining passengers and past the covey of stewards still in the doorway, still wearing their pasted-on smiles.

"Forgot something," he grunted. "Back in two shakes."

He ran down the aisle, popped the emergency hatch over the wing, and squeezed through, to the accompaniment of startled noises from behind. He rolled through the wing's trailing edge, broke his momentum with his hands, and dropped, managing to land on a pile of luggage on a convenient baggage cart. He hit the ground running. It had all happened very fast . . . too fast for immediate and active pursuit, he hoped. Their gate was nearly at the corner of the terminal building. He disappeared under the belly of an adjacent parked aircraft and ran around the corner of the building, into relative darkness.

A baggage-handler yelled, "Hey!" and that was all.

He stopped in the shadows to take stock. He was inside the fence system separating the aircraft pads from the public. There were vehicular gates, he knew, but he wasn't sure where, or how many. He *was* sure, however, that about now the narcs would be onto the airport security people, and very shortly such gates would be watched. He couldn't count on getting through one in time. There were numerous entrances to the cavernous baggage and office spaces beneath the terminal itself, but he had neither uniform nor coveralls and, if he entered those spaces, he was sure to be noticed and challenged by one of the terrorist-shy workers there. He couldn't risk a gunfight at this point. He needed to do something, and do it now.

He looked longingly at the short-term parking lot with its thousands of anonymous cars just beyond the fence, but gave up the idea of trying to scale that ten foot chain-link thing in the full light of the parking lot floods. Only one direction offered instant invisibility . . . out. Out onto the vast acreage of the field itself . . . out into the cut-over weeds between the great runways and taxi strips. The bright lights of the terminal area faded fast, out there, and his clothes were dark. Even the tower would never spot him amongst the weeds. He fell on his stomach and began worming out into the darkness. Sooner or later they'd think of searching the field itself, but that was later. For now, it was his best shot.

He lay prone and considered his position; he'd casually reconnoitered the airport several weeks before. He knew he was within a great triangle, bordered by the terminal area, the main runway, and the crossing runway. He knew the airport was completely enclosed by a high chain-link fence, unlighted except in the terminal area. If he could make it to the fence and follow it, he might find a way out. The fence on the side of the triangle to his right paralleled a busy highway lined with fast-food joints and gas stations . . . no good. Behind the fence to his left were woods and darkness . . . fine. But, to reach it, he'd have to get across the main runway.

He bellied along, cursing the sharp stones and thistles, until he was far enough out into the darkness to risk standing, then made for the runway, aiming for a point midway between marker lights. He sprawled in the weeds, looking across one hundred eighty feet of bare concrete and waiting. He waited five minutes before a departing 747 lumbered along a taxiway to the far end of the runway over a mile ahead of him, turned, and came screaming toward him at full takeoff power. He buried his face in the weeds, arms wrapped around his head, as the monster exploded past him. Briefly stunned by the insane fury of the jet blast, he forced himself to his feet and raced across the naked runway. Anyone watching from the tower would be watching the aircraft and not the runway behind it, he hoped. He threw himself into the weeds and scuttled off toward the fence, into the welcome darkness.

It was more than a mile and a half from where he'd intercepted the fence to the corner of the airport farthest from the terminal. He'd covered over a mile, slinking along the fence line, woods and

darkness beckoning from the other side. It was slow going; he had to throw himself face down each time an arriving or departing aircraft blasted by him, landing lights blazing. Once he'd tried to scale the fence, in an interval between aircraft. The blunt toes of his boots wouldn't fit the diamond-shaped openings in the wire, and his fingers and arms weren't equal to the task of lifting his weight unassisted. He wondered, dully, whether they'd begun searching the field yet, and if there were dogs. If there were dogs he was finished. Then he fell flat, trying to melt into the earth. A car was approaching, slowly, lights out, on an adjoining taxiway. It passed. He knew, then, that the search had begun, and that he had to find some sort of cover fast, before foot patrols arrived.

Suddenly he was moving over blacktop . . . yellow strips appeared. A parking lot, empty. Ahead loomed a large, low building with a row of windows, dimly lighted. He crept up cautiously, and peered in. He could see nothing but the shadowy outlines of aircraft. A storage hangar? If he could get inside without tripping some alarm, he could surely find some spot to hole up in and wait out the search and the darkness. Perhaps there would be a ladder inside. He examined the window carefully for some sign of wires or magnetic switches . . . nothing.

Flynn had always considered the Air Museum a melancholy place. He switched off the lights in his office and began a slow patrol along the familiar aisles of the big, barnlike building, now lit only dimly by the rows of night lights set into the roof trusses above. All the visitors had gone, followed quickly by the staff of volunteer workers. Flynn was alone with his friends.

They stood, quietly, in orderly rows, flanking the aisles, unmoving. At night, Flynn thought, the old aircraft always seemed poised . . . waiting. Waiting for someone that would never come again. Nor for me, thought Flynn. I'm just a museum piece too, now. He'd known most of these aircraft when they were new. Some, he'd flown. Now they were curiosities . . . had outlived their time. Each had its little sign: names, dates, one-line histories. Like epitaphs.

He walked slowly past the little yellow racer with the engine that always seemed too big for it, and an instrument panel with just one instrument, an oil pressure gauge. He remembered being taken to the National Air Races as a small boy and watching it

snarl past overhead. He passed the little J3 Club, resplendent in its classic yellow with the black lightning bolt on the side; he'd soloed in one when he was sixteen. He turned down World War II alley and patted the oversized cowl of the Jug . . . the mighty P47 Thunderbolt, then passed the Navy F4U Corsair. Its folded wings always reminded him of Dürer's *Praying Hands*. He rehearsed one of his big regrets; that, during his stint as director of this mausoleum, he'd never been able to acquire an F4F Wildcat, one of the Corsair's distinguished predecessors. He remembered the day that Lieutenant James Flynn, USMC, had incautiously released his F4F's landing gear crank with the gear only half up; the gear fell, and the spinning crank about broke his arm. His reverie was interrupted by the sound of breaking glass.

Flynn moved quietly toward the source of the sound; at this point he was not alarmed, only puzzled. There had never been a vandalism problem here, with the museum located where it was, and an antique airplane is a devilishly difficult thing to steal. Reaching a point in the aisle from which he could see the row of canopy windows behind the old helicopters, he froze, suddenly grateful that he'd been quiet. One of the windows had been pushed open, and just inside it, not very visible in the dim light, stood a man in a quilted ski jacket, peering about. The light was adequate, however, for Flynn to discern the gun the man was holding.

The rectangular display floor of the museum was as open as a football field except for the serried ranks of the old airplanes. An aisle ran around all four sides, and a series of transverse aisles cut across this, like the five yard markers on a football field. The old airplanes were arrayed in the long rectangular spaces between the transverse aisles, the floor space beneath their bodies buried in deep shadow. Flynn stood motionless, back to one of the long walls, near a corner. The man with the gun stood about halfway down the adjacent short wall.

Flynn was sure he hadn't been seen yet. Just beside him was a little alcove, presently dark, which housed the entrances to the public restrooms. In there, he'd be out of sight unless the gunman walked directly up to him. With infinite caution he backed into the alcove. He was frightened, now. He had no idea who the man was, nor what he sought, nor how long he'd stay. He felt that the man would probably shoot him if he was spotted. Not necessarily, but Flynn was unwilling to bet his life on it. His best bet, he decided, was to get out of there; if he could remain unnoticed and get to his

car, out of sight in the staff parking shed, he'd have it made. The intruder might hear him start up, but he'd be long gone before the man could get to him. He didn't come in a car, Flynn thought, or I'd have heard him. But how to get out? There were outside doors in the staff wing, behind the opposite long wall, but the gunman was in between. The public lobby doors were just next to the rest-room alcove, but they were locked for the night, and his keys were in his office, in the staff wing. There were the windows in the short wall where the man had entered, and that was it.

He thought of hiding in the ladies' room, on the assumption that it was about the last place the man was likely to explore, but rejected the idea. It had no windows and only one door, a prospect Flynn found unpleasant. No, it had to be out. Flynn lay flat on the floor and cautiously eased the top of his head out into the aisle until he could see around the corner and into the main room, eyes at floor level. It was a stunt he'd seen on TV; it seemed plausible and he hoped it would work.

At first, in the dimness, he could make out nothing from that angle except a forest of landing gear struts and wheels, like birches growing among boulders. Then: motion! Beneath the aircraft, across the floor, he could see shoes and trouser legs moving slowly down the opposite long wall, stopping occasionally, as the beam of a pencil flashlight probed about. The gunman had moved a quarter of the way around the floor. He's exploring, checking the place out, thought Flynn. I've got to do something before he gets around to here. He's bound to flash the light into this alcove, and here I'll be, like a 'coon in a tree. He wondered if he dared to try to make it to the windows. It would have to be on his belly, crawling under and around the aircraft, and, with his arthritis, it would be slow going. When he gets to the corner and starts down the other short wall, thought Flynn, he'll be as far as he's going to get from the windows. I'll have to try it.

But the shoes and trouser legs stopped short of the corner; they paused in front of the door in the far wall leading to the staff wing. Flynn held his breath, picturing the man reading the AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY sign. Probably wondering what's back there, he thought. Flynn knew what was back there . . . more doors. Offices, the library, the shop, parts lockers, the janitor's room. He knew that if the gunman were in there and decided to look around, it would take a while. If he does, Flynn thought, I'm going to make a break for the windows, and on my hind legs, not on my belly.

The door squeaked, the shoes turned endwise and disappeared through the door. Flynn counted to five, lest the other suddenly reappear, then ran down the aisle toward the windows, grateful that he was wearing sponge-soled loafers.

He got as far as the corner with the short aisle when his luck ran out. The aisles were lined with low pipe stanchions through which ran yellow ropes separating the exhibits from the visitors. The combination of haste and dim light caused Flynn to cut the corner a bit too sharply; he clipped the corner stanchion and it went down, and the ropes took the two adjacent stanchions down with it. The clangor, in the silent building, was like a depth charge. Jesus! thought Flynn, it's all over now!

To his right stood an old Waco float plane, the long boatlike floats each nearly the size of the fuselage. He hit the floor, rolled under the guard rope and crawled between the floats, then lay still and tried to control his breathing. If he could not see out, at least he couldn't be seen, either. Flynn was now a badly frightened old man. Had he known, the intruder was, himself, seriously rattled. He'd thought the building deserted. Then the sudden crash. Had he been seen? How many were out there, and who? Not cops . . . they'd be all over the place by now, waving guns and flashing lights and shouting. A night watchman? They didn't usually kick over things. In five seconds he was back in the doorway, pencil flash doused. Nothing. He cursed the dimness, wished he knew where the light switches were, and at once realized he wouldn't dare turn them on. Should he leave the building? If he did, whoever was in here with him would find a phone and the balloon would go up for sure. No, he'd wait. He was the one with eight rounds in the clip and one in the chamber. He had the horses. He'd wait. In the corner was a ten foot workstand used by the staffers for access to the tops of the airplanes. From the top of it he'd have a pretty good overview of everything. Quietly he climbed it and settled back, like a hunter in a tree, waiting for the buck to come his way.

Flynn knew exactly where the gunman was. He knew the museum the way his tongue knew his upper palate. There was no mistaking the creak of that workstand; it was as ancient as some of the airplanes it served. The man was waiting and watching. He would do the same, mainly because he could think of nothing else to do. He lay and watched the hands on his luminescent watch dial creep around. He cursed his arthritic knees, which were beginning to stiffen from remaining motionless. He wished he had access to

the restroom. He knew he must pull himself together and consider options.

He could remain where he was and wait for the gunman to make the first move. Whoever he was, and whatever he wanted, he appeared to be in no great hurry. Suppose . . . unlikely, but just suppose . . . the thug didn't come down off his perch until the first innocent volunteer staffer unlocked the door and walked in, come morning? What then? The best scenario Flynn could picture had the staffer being escorted back to his car with a gun behind his shoulder blade. Or *her* shoulder blade. And after that?

Or, he could wait through the hours of remaining dark, and daylight would be streaming through those windows and straight in between the sheltering floats where he was hiding. If he even got as far as the windows then, he'd make a lovely silhouette.

Okay . . . try this: A six foot aisle separated him from the row of old helicopters, and directly behind the helicopters were the windows. A diversion? Get the gunman to look away momentarily, then try to get across the aisle and under one of the choppers. But how? Next in line beside Flynn's sheltering Waco was an old Republic Seabee. It was a poor little sad-sack of an airplane, a bastard son of the mighty Jug one aisle over, but Flynn had always had a soft spot for the thing. It had come to the museum fitted with a red rotating anti-collision light on the top of the vertical tail fin. Flynn had had the light connected so that it could be operated, now and then, for the amusement of visiting kids. He'd had a switch mounted, unobtrusively, under the nose, so that staffers could reach it without having to climb into the cockpit.

With infinite caution Flynn worked his way around the tail of a float and, hidden by the Seabee's wing, across the intervening space; he slid beneath the little hull. He reached up and out and flipped that switch, praying that the battery had been kept up. Instantly gobs of bright blood-red light began chasing each other around the building, high up on the walls. Flynn was able to hear the involuntary grunt of surprise as the intense red beam swept across the gunman's dark-adapted eyes. He threw himself forward, toward the aisle, but his arthritic left knee gave way beneath him and he sprawled on the concrete floor, short of the aisle, chance gone, while the other man thundered down from the workstand, silence forgotten. He ran down the long side aisle to the corner and stopped, gun poised, peering down the cross-aisle which separated Flynn from the row of old helicopters, and, behind them, the windows.

Then, at once, the silence reasserted itself, reinforced by the gobs of red light circling endlessly, silently, in the gloom overhead. Flynn was pressed by a mounting desperation. He's down . . . and he knows just about where I am he thought. He began a slow, wormlike, utterly silent crawl, away from the Seabee, away from the gunman, back into the shelter of the Waco's float. He knew he couldn't stay there. His enemy knew he was somewhere close to the Seabee and, at any moment, would come seeking him. The only way open to him was back, away from the windows, away from the cross-aisle where the gunman stood.

Flynn inched his way in that direction, peering continually over his left shoulder at the faint glimmer of the enemy's pencil flash. He managed to work his way across the next cross-aisle undetected, and crawl under another of the old aircraft. So far, the gunman had not moved. Flynn knew that if he could reach the next cross-aisle, and move to his right, to the other long wall, there would be a fire alarm box. Tripping the alarm would not only set up a hellish clamor within the building but would ring in the airport fire station, summoning help. He thought that, while the gunman was distracted, he had a chance to make it into the cockpit of a nearby Jenny biplane unseen, and crouch there until the firemen arrived. Ever so carefully, he moved off to his right, taking a position under the old Jenny's wing, and looked back. The gunman, too, had moved. He was now peering directly down the cross-aisle Flynn had reached. There was no possibility of reaching the fire alarm box with the man there.

Flynn eased backward, around an engine display stand, and placed the bulk of an antique jet engine between him and the gunman. His fingers closed around the big pocket knife he always carried. He knelt behind the old engine and lobbed the knife like a grenade toward the far end of the building. It clanged off one of the roof trusses, crashed against a sheet-metal airplane skin somewhere, and thudded to the floor. He heard another surprised grunt, then nothing. He eased his hand, at floor level, around the engine stand. No flashlight gleam. No trouser legs. Nothing.

The young man in the quilted ski jacket had finally realized the folly of pursuing an elusive spook on his own home grounds by running up and down the aisles flashing a light. Christ! thought Flynn, he's gone to ground. He's on his belly like me, now. He was sorry he'd thrown away his knife. Flynn was getting close to the end of his emotional rope, but some vestigial marine macho stuck to him. He didn't scream "Semper Paratus" or anything, he just turned

and began a silent crawl back the way he'd come . . . toward the windows. The red lights still circled hypnotically overhead.

He'd made it to the five yard line, the last cross-aisle between him and the old helicopters . . . and the windows. He was resting, briefly, under the old Seabee, gathering himself for the final dash, when he heard it. And he was able to hear it only because his hearing aid was turned full up. When set like that, the thing amplified high-pitched sounds to an uncanny degree. He heard just the tiniest "wheep" . . . a sleeve or trouser cuff being dragged across the graininess of the concrete floor. Jesus, thought Flynn, he's close, very close. His hand touched wood . . . a chock; a big wooden wedge sometimes jammed under an airplane's wheel to keep it from rolling. The museum kept a few scattered around the floor for a touch of authenticity. Flynn grabbed it; no match for a gun, but better than nothing. He was old and tired and sick, and desperately frightened. And the red gobs of light came on, relentlessly. Jap tracer bullets over his wing? And again the tiny "wheep." All at once his dwindling resources ran out. Heedless, he sprang for the aisle and safety.

An orange-white flash and simultaneous crack-thud told him he'd been fired at and missed. Thirty feet away his assailant was emerging from beneath another aircraft, still prone, half his weight still on his elbows. Flynn reacted without thought. With his remaining strength he threw the chock, dived across the aisle, and rolled under the nearest helicopter, into the shadows. The five pound chock glanced off the floor and struck the gunman full in the forehead.

Flynn struggled to his feet. Could he make the windows? Even as he wondered he knew it was hopeless. He might get to the open window, and maybe even roll through, but he could no longer run, and the other was already up, shaking his head like a bull, and coming. The side of the helicopter to Flynn's left rose, as high and featureless as a cliff. The little old chopper to his right stood with both cabin doors rolled back, cockpit floor even with his navel. He stabbed his hand in through the open door and felt under the pilot's seat for the old navy flare pistol he knew would be there. He yanked it from its clips, fell, and rolled under the belly of the machine, and flattened himself against the other side. His left forefinger probed the flare gun's barrel. It wasn't supposed to be loaded, but it was. Silently he blessed the careless volunteer who'd permitted this; probably didn't even realize it was there. Who looks under seats?

He wondered if the thing would still work, after twenty-five years of neglect.

He eased forward and got his eyes just beyond the chopper's aft doorframe, peering out through the nose bubble. The other man was coming on, slowly, more confidently, down the other side of the helicopter. He didn't know exactly where Flynn was. Flynn knelt, so that only his head was above the helicopter's floorline, slid forward into the open door, and braced both hands, holding the gun, on the copilot's seat cushion, facing the open doorway on the other side. The ultimate moment had come, and Flynn's fear had somehow dropped away. Then the other man came into line with him, on the other side of the aircraft, peering aft, gun aimed toward the window. Flynn barked, "Freeze! You twitch, you're dead!"

The gunman stopped dead, then swivelled just his head. Slowly. He found himself looking down the barrel of the biggest handgun he'd ever seen. It was shaking, ever so slightly, and, behind it, he was able to make out the seamed face of an old man.

"Hey, Pop! Let's talk this over, huh?" His eyes dropped momentarily to his own gun.

"Don't try it, son," said Flynn. There was a frozen instant when they looked into each other's eyes, then the other made a convulsive movement of his gun arm. Flynn fired the old flare gun, from a range of five feet, directly into his face. It worked.

He screamed and clapped both hands to his face, hair ablaze, gun forgotten. He fell. Flynn rolled back under the helicopter and grabbed the gun, then hobbled a few steps to a nearby fire extinguisher. He discharged the carbon dioxide over the man's head, and headed for the nearest fire alarm box. The Marines had landed.

The state police lieutenant who walked in on Flynn a week later was also in command of the airport security detail, and he and Flynn were old friends.

"Okay, jarhead! On your feet," he barked. Flynn's friend was ex-navy, and all marines were jarheads.

"Relax, Casey," Flynn said, "we used to be on the same side, remember? You come to arrest me for blasting that thug?"

"Matter of fact, I've come to lay a merit badge on you. This is it, and may Allah protect you." Casey laid a check on Flynn's desk. There were four figures to the west of the decimal point.

Flynn blinked, then rocked back. "Casey, there is no need to bribe me; Father Nolan will never hear from my lips about your

ill-advised plea to Allah. What is this nonsense with the check?"

Casey chuckled. "You really marked that punk up pretty good. Last time I saw him, his hair and eyebrows were gone, and the side of his head looked like a bowl of Texas chili, but you missed his eyes. He'll be able to see the judge out of both of them."

"I'm glad . . . I guess. Now, about this check?"

"The feds were tracking that guy all the way up from Miami. They were right some browned off when they missed him in the terminal, and happier than the proverbial pig when you nailed him up here. And they were downright amazed when they found he had about a quarter mil in prime Colombian emeralds on him, in addition to the junk."

"The check, Casey? The goddamn check?"

"The emeralds were stolen in South America and run in through the same pipeline that carried the junk. There was a reward for them. The check is it. The feds can't accept it. We can't accept it. You think maybe you can?"

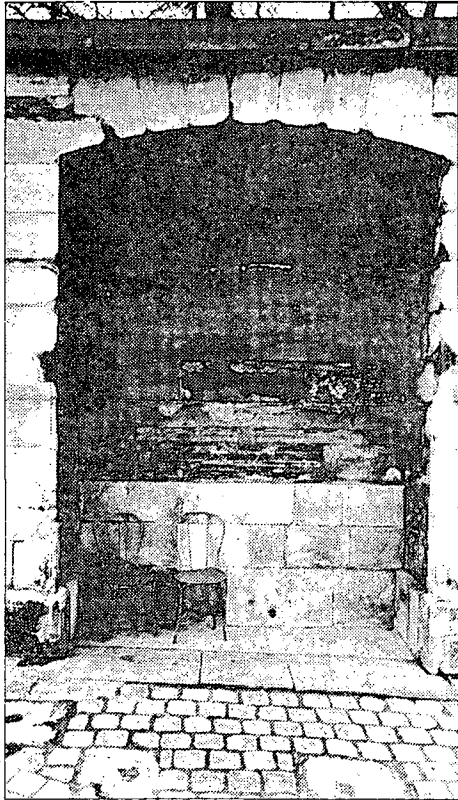
Flynn eyed the check, then sat back. Opening a desk drawer, he produced a bottle. "Bushmill's Marine Arthritis Medication. Swabbies are also entitled." He closed his eyes and told Casey about a partially decomposed carcass of an F4F he knew about but the museum hadn't been able to afford.

"It's in tough shape, but the engine's intact and most of the original instruments are there. It'll take a hell of a lot of work to restore it sufficiently to go on display, but after all, what are volunteers for? Too bad we can't paint it green."

"Green for emeralds?" asked Casey.

"No . . . green for money," said Flynn.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

What the Cleaning Woman Knew

by Lawrence Doorley



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Blaustein '89

Mrs. Grimm do windows? Don't be ridiculous. As West Hampshire's premier cleaning woman, Mrs. Grimm didn't have to do windows; heavens, no. She had a long waiting list. She could pick her clients ("my clients" was Mrs. Grimm's term for her employers). Women desperate for Mrs. Grimm's consummate workmanship had to be careful not to attempt to bribe Mrs. Grimm away from her regular clients, it being general knowledge among the upper crust, the affluent who were able to afford her, that bribery was anathema to Mrs. Grimm, a woman of extremely high principles—she never peeped into desk drawers, listened on the phone extension in the kitchen, held letters up to the light, kept stray ten dollar bills found behind the furniture. And it was her practice to turn in all coins recovered from chairs and sofas.

Barring the demise of a regular client, the only way for someone to move up on the list was for a regular client to move out of town. Only then, after Mrs. Grimm had thoroughly checked the references, would she consent to honor a new client by becoming her cleaning woman.

No doubt snorts of disbelief are pending, or already emitted, because of the lavish praise being showered upon a rather ordinary species of humanity and that's perfectly understandable, especially if the snorter, or snorters, have never required the services of a cleaning woman. Can Mrs. Grimm actually be the paragon described? Is she faultless, flawless, perfection personified?

No, of course not. She is a human being, not exactly Lowell's "Earth's noblest thing—a woman perfected." She had her faults. She loved to wallow in gossip, she couldn't help herself, it was like breathing in and out. She loved to eat. She had a quick temper. She had an exaggerated opinion of her ability to write a best selling romance novel. And as this little tragedy unfolds it will be seen that Mrs. Grimm commits a crime whose consequences could have been dire indeed had not happenstance intervened.

But as to Mrs. Grimm's capabilities as a cleaning woman there can be no encomium adequate enough to do justice to her workmanship. She was superb, the best, the very best. Poor little wee bitty spiders, hardly more than little brown dots blending into the baseboard behind the large sofa in the front room, cowered in fright when Mrs. Grimm got going. They knew the jig was up, the poor little chaps.

When the curtain rises on this melancholy drama it is a lovely day in May, 1983, and Mrs. Grimm, Judith, has just finished de-

vouring a second enormous slice of zuppa inglese, an Italian cake, the ultimate finishing touch of her noonday lunch as catered by Angelo's, the best in the business. (Not all the clients have Mrs. Grimm's lunch catered, actually only Mrs. Thornhill, Wednesday. The others, however, prepare almost the equivalent of Angelo's, keeping Mrs. Grimm happy being paramount.)

The setting is the forty-five thousand dollar kitchen of the luxurious eight room first floor condominium of Grace Peabody Thornhill in Sylvan Heights, situated in the best part of West Hampshire, of course. It is around twelve fifteen, twelve sixteen, close to there. Mrs. Grimm is pouring a second cup of coffee when the door between the front room and the kitchen opens. Mrs. Thornhill, age fifty-four, slim, stunning, a blonde beauty (the eighty-five hundred dollar face lift two years ago and the expertise of Helene's Beauty Shoppe each deserve some credit), perfectly groomed as always, enters. Comes the ritual.

"Oh, you're finished, Judith. Do you mind if I join you in a cup of coffee?"

"No, no, of course not. Here . . . let me pour it."

The coffee is poured as Mrs. Thornhill positions her dainty posterior ladylikely on a chair across the beautiful kitchen table from Mrs. Grimm, who, attired as she is in the raiment of her profession, cannot help feeling several rather acute pangs of jealousy as she covertly scrutinizes Mrs. Thornhill's lovely new frothy spring dress (three hundred fifty if it cost a nickel, Mrs. Grimm estimates).

Mrs. Grimm is quite a contrast to the svelte, petite, poised Mrs. Thornhill, since Mrs. Grimm is tall, big-boned, weighs a dubious hundred and fifty-eight pounds (it will be revealed later on, the poor woman, that this is the one area, her weight, where Mrs. Grimm's reputation for honesty suffers a small taint). Mrs. Grimm dyes her hair brown (but we won't tell, will we?). She has a round, rather pretty face, very few wrinkles, nice brown eyes, an adequate nose (she has always been overly conscious of her nose, the poor woman). She too, like Mrs. Thornhill, is fifty-four and she too, again like Mrs. Thornhill, is a widow, still longing for the knight in shining armor, who is long overdue.

Mrs. Thornhill thanks Mrs. Grimm for the coffee. "How was the dessert, Judith? Up to Angelo's usual high standards?"

"Oh . . . it was great . . . scrumptious. Here, why don't you have a piece."

"Oh, no, no, Judith," says Mrs. Thornhill, shrinking from temp-

tation. "I'd love to, but . . . well, you know, my diet. Ah . . . anything new since last Wednesday, Judith?"

Anything new? You wouldn't believe some of the stuff that's going on. Takes your breath away.

"For instance," continues Mrs. Grimm, starting to roll, "you remember Monday's daughter? The one that married that goofy-looking Harvard philosophy professor, eight, nine years back?"

Yes, Mrs. Thornhill remembered.

"Well, she's back with Mommy. She and the three kids, the five-year-old twins and that eight-year-old boy, a real humdinger. Brought his pets with him, a frog, a snake, and a trained mouse. Well, you can bet I put a stop to that kid: right now, out to the garage with them, I said, and Monday backed me up. But that's not the real story."

"Oh, is that so?" said Mrs. Thornhill, quite interested as usual but pretending to be only politely so. She didn't fool Mrs. Grimm. They were all alike, her clients. And she was well aware that Mrs. Thornhill, for all her refinement, her culture, her education (Wellesley '50), her money, was just as eager for the latest scoop as would have been the least affluent of West Hampshireites, no names, please. Even Mrs. Grimm's former Tuesdays—the poor doddering dears—her clients for seven years, had eagerly awaited their day and the latest gossip from Mrs. Grimm.

Not that the gossip was one-sided (except in the case of the poor old Tuesdays, frail and housebound). The clients, even Mrs. Thornhill, on Mrs. Grimm's solemn promise not to let it go beyond the kitchen in question, provided their share, too.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Grimm, shifting into high. "It seems the prof has been spending quite a few weekends in Boston, his explanation being a sudden bunch of conferences, symposiums, you know. Well, Monday's daughter began getting suspicious, so she hired a P.I. to tail hubby. The P.I. followed him, saw him pick up a blonde bimbo young enough to be his daughter. Followed them to Boston where the two lovey-doveys spent the whole weekend in a motel room, only coming out once to drive around the corner to a liquor store. How about that?"

"Men," tish-tished Mrs. Thornhill. "They're all alike"—thinking, of course, of the late unlamented George (he drank, you know) dead of a heart attack these nine years after long overindulgence, constant philandering. Fortunately, good old George came of old money, most of which he left to his widow.

Hitting on all cylinders now, Mrs. Grimm purred forward. Monday's daughter had started divorce proceedings. But, and here Mrs. Grimm frowned noticeably, with four extras to clean up after, she had to tell Monday that if this continued for very much longer she would just have to terminate their relationship. Not that she wanted to.

"After all," went on Mrs. Grimm, "she's been a good client for the past ten years, ever since her husband died. He drank, you know."

Mrs. Thornhill knew. Mrs. Grimm had told her often enough. And Mrs. Thornhill knew Judith's Monday quite well, both women being on several local committees.

"Of course," continued Mrs. Grimm, her tone lowered to the conspiratorial, juicy revelations pending, "it isn't just the daughter and the kids, even though that boy is . . . you can tell his father hasn't paid any attention to him . . . it's something, ah, more important that's bothering Monday. That woman's sixty if she's a day and the way she's been carrying on with that Johnny—he's a tall blond apprentice plumber, just a kid—well, it's a caution. According to Monday's next door neighbor . . . she saw me emptying the wastebaskets out back and just had to stop me and babble it all out."

"It?"

"Yeah. According to the neighbor, a busybody, gossipy thing if I ever saw one, that Johnny comes to the house at least twice a week, seem to be a lot of leaky pipes."

"My goodness," exclaimed Mrs. Thornhill, the barest hint of envy in her voice.

"Do I have time for a few more items?" asked Mrs. Grimm, knowing full well what Mrs. Thornhill would say.

"Of course, Judith, it's only twelve twenty-five. Ah, any news about your Thursday or Friday?"

"Thursday's a nervous wreck, wringing her hands and following me all over the place, and I don't blame her."

"Oh?"

"You see, Mrs. Thornhill, hubby just up and quit his high-paying job as vice-president of that insurance company. According to her, he said he's going on sixty and life's passing him by. And with the kids all grown, out on their own, doing well, he's told her it's now or never. Guess what he's planning to do?"

"Oh, sail around the world," suggested Mrs. Thornhill, smiling her charming smile. "Or perhaps climb Mount Everest. Or maybe

even swim the Hellespont, something like that?"

"Worse. He says he's gonna raise catfish. Imagine! Crazy, eh?"

"Oh, I won't say that, Judith," replied Mrs. Thornhill, a voracious reader, up to date on many subjects. "I've read that there's money in raising pond catfish. Of course I believe that most of it is done down south."

"Yeah, I guess so; seems logical. Anyway, it isn't his quitting, taking early retirement that's at the bottom of her whimpering and wailing. No, ma'am, she can't fool me." The latter was said with a smirk that bordered on the lascivious, and it was not lost on Mrs. Thornhill.

"You can't mean, that . . . that your Thursday is . . . Judith, you can't mean it?"

Mrs. Grimm grinned, just a wee bit. This was the kind of moment among her clients that Mrs. Grimm savored. To be first with a really earthshaking morsel of scandal; ah, moments to remember.

"Yes, another man, a kid, can't be over twenty-two. That's getting to be the rage, what with Monday and her Johnny plumber boy. Well, this one, Thursday's, is named Tommy. She hired him to work in the greenhouse that hubby let go to hell. And if hubby's going to be under foot all the time . . . well!"

"Why, Judith," expostulated Mrs. Thornhill, shocked. "That woman's been the epitome of rectitude, the most outspoken critic of our library committee, always claiming that the books we select are vile and filthy and . . . and you mean that she . . . why, she sings in the choir . . . never misses church. . . . My goodness, West Hampshire is as bad as Peyton Place, my goodness."

"Wait'll you hear about Friday," chortled Mrs. Grimm, happy as a magpie in the garbage dump. "She's into yoga. Got an Indian—one of them tall, dark ones from over the sea—he's her instructor. And . . . he . . . stays . . . overnight . . . she can't fool me . . . I can tell . . . how about that?"

"Well," replied Mrs. Thornhill, thinking it over, "she is a widow and, I guess, one gets lonely, you know, Judith."

"Yeah," said Mrs. Grimm, "I know."

"Well, that leaves Tuesday. Have the new people moved in yet?"

That seemingly innocent question caused Mrs. Grimm to grow red, to drop her head over the coffee cup as if searching for a buggy miscreant. Then, raising her head, pushing her Brunette (dyed, you know) hair back, she stammered a reply.

"Ah . . . well . . . it . . . there's only one . . . just ah . . . one person in that big house . . . ah . . . my. Oh my, look at the time! Here

I've been gabbing away and forgetting that I'm only half done." With that she hurriedly pushed herself up from the chair and hastened out of the kitchen.

My goodness, said Mrs. Thornhill to herself, what was all that about?

What Mrs. Grimm had deliberately kept from Mrs. Thornhill was the fact that her new Tuesday was a widower, in his early sixties, a tall, slender, quite handsome man with all his hair, only a few streaks of grey, a retired assistant professor of engineering from a Midwestern university.

The new Tuesday had been inherited, barely though. When Helen Watson, a ball-of-fire real estate broker—it was she who originally got Mrs. Grimm interested in housecleaning—mentioned that she had sold the original Tuesdays' house—the poor quaking dears, bound for the nursing home—Mrs. Grimm had said that she intended to give her Tuesdays from then on to an affluent widow who lived in a brand spanking new six room condo and who had been on the waiting list for three years.

Helen Watson told Judy not to be a damn fool.

"Don't be a damn fool, Judy," Helen admonished her. "Listen, kid, wait'll you see the new owner. First, he's a widower. His wife died of cancer three years ago. He's a retired college professor, engineering, I think. Second, and best of all, he's only sixty-two, looks fifty-two. Tall, slender, handsome, one of those long, sad, poetic-type faces, handsome as hell. Just him . . . just he . . . in that eight room house. He says the place reminds him of his boyhood in Vermont—the town, the house, everything. I'd advise you to stick around, kid. Who knows?"

Dear Helen, knowing full well that Judy yearned to marry again, but to marry someone a lot different from Alfred. Not that Judy hadn't had plenty of opportunities since the departure of poor unlucky Alfred. Since then many unattached males of her generation had ardently sought her hand and the rest of her zaftig one hundred fifty-eight pounds. Full, shapely, well-rounded, the widow Grimm was held in high esteem ("hut damn," many an admirer was wont to think, "boy, there's an armful") by many fellows who fell into the same commonplace category as the late Alfred. Good chaps generally, but none had come close to sending icy fingers up and down her sturdy, well-upholstered spine, nor caused the long dormant butterflies to once more twitch and squirm in her tummy as once they had long ago, in high school, for the boy who got away (he went to Yale, married a girl from Smith, moved to California).

So . . . quite excited, small turmoil in her tummy, Mrs. Grimm phoned the affluent widow who had been told that she was next on the list. When informed that circumstances over which she, Mrs. Grimm, had absolutely no control whatsoever were forcing her to remain at her regular Tuesday position, even though the house had been sold, the woman went into hysterics. That upset Mrs. Grimm, a compassionate person, and she told the hysterical woman to calm down, she probably would be there next Tuesday. But the God-given bolt from the blue, the once in a lifetime chance of being alone in a house with someone else as . . . well . . . God Almighty, a person would be crazy to give that up without a fight.

Mrs. Grimm had gotten into the housecleaning business accidentally, the accident happening to Mr. Grimm, Alfred (he drank, you know), a small potato in a chickenfeed job in the county courthouse who spent his weekends with the swell fellows at the Rose of Bogfenny, a neighborhood tavern. Egressing from the Rose in the wee hours of a Sunday morning, Alfred, besotted, bestoned, befuddled, turned right instead of left, and as the poet said, "That . . . made all the difference." Alas, unlike the poet, who lived to regret his choice, Alfred's wrong turn proved fatal, he ending up in Hawthorne's Pond, having tripped over the *No Swimming Allowed—Water Contaminated* sign that someone had knocked down.

Fortunately for Judith, she had insisted that they take out mortgage insurance when they bought the little six room Cape Cod house. Thus, Judith was left with bitter memories (Alfred had been a real pest, bore, loser, the poor fellow—she had married him on the rebound from the boy that got away), a paid-up house, six hundred fifty dollars in the bank, and a job that paid coolie wages.

Searching for some means to augment her miserable income, she encountered Helen Watson, the ball-of-fire real estate broker, an old high school friend. Helen had an idea. That's if Judy wasn't too proud.

As a broker Helen often had empty houses for sale.

"A sudden job transfer, a bank repossession," she explained, "other reasons. Well, Judy, in many cases the places are left damn dirty. And I've had a hell of a time finding competent cleaning women. Do you think . . . well, I have to ask, don't get angry . . . just how much are you making at the bank?"

"Two thirty an hour," mumbled Judy, hanging her head.

"I thought so. Damn, they oughta be ashamed of themselves. Listen, kid, I can pay you five dollars an hour. You can keep your

bank job, do this in your spare time, at your own hours."

Of course she took the job. And was great. Helen was well pleased. In fact, in less than six months she had raised her to six dollars an hour, good money for cleaning women back then, 1968.

Word got around. Soon Mrs. Grimm was being beseeched from all sides to become a permanent cleaning woman. She talked it over with Helen Watson, who, although it would mean losing Judy's part-time service, told her to go ahead. And she wished her luck, sincerely.

Of course the big shots at the Second National were outraged. Employees just don't have any loyalty nowadays, they all agreed, and then took great pains to see how they could cheat Mrs. Grimm out of the week's vacation she had coming. Their lawyer advised them to pay her.

At the beginning Mrs. Grimm went overboard, accepting six clients which meant working Saturday. But with a confidence born of the ardor with which she was being pursued, she wanted it understood that she didn't do windows. That was fine with her clients. There were four or five professional window-cleaning firms in West Hampshire. No problem. Nor was there a problem about lunch. Each client was eager to provide Mrs. Grimm with whatever her heart desired.

Mrs. Grimm got a lucky break when Saturday, a bleached blonde divorcée of uncertain age, ran off with the head cashier of the Second National (he left behind a wife and four children) less than three months after she had become a full-time cleaning woman. That made her work week five days, she refusing to accept any more Saturday clients.

The years passed. Clients changed. Awful things happened. Her first Monday shot her husband and committed suicide when he told her he wanted a divorce, a young filly in the offing. Poor Mrs. Grimm. She found the bodies.

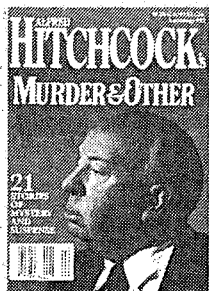
Tuesdays, overall, had been bad luck. The initial Tuesday, a sixtyish widow with lots of money, departed for a two-week cruise to the Caribbean and disappeared one moon-splashed night somewhere between Antigua and Guadaloupe in the Leewards. Poor faithful Mrs. Grimm, she kept going to the house for a whole year, tidying up, airing the place, checking for cobwebs in the basement. Finally, no one paying her, she just had to take on another Tuesday (seven years after the first Tuesday's mysterious disappearance, the estate finally paid the back wages, with interest).

In spite of a thorough check (there'd be no mistakes this time),

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the second Tuesday—a wispy, churchgoing widow with an angelic face and excellent references from her minister, her doctor, two other upstanding West Hampshireites—this poor creature proved to be a kleptomaniac with the K Mart being her main target. Caught red-handed with two dollars and eighty-seven cents' worth of purloined goods (several candy bars, a bag of clothespins, a bottle of nail polish), the woman was given a stern lecture and told that the next time would mean prosecution. Mrs. Grimm learned of this felonious episode from her Wednesday and to the sticky-fingered Tuesday promptly gave notice, refusing to allow her reputation to be sullied through association.

The third Tuesdays proved ideal. They, dear septuagenarians, never caused a moment's trouble. The only drawback was that they were homebodies who didn't get around, and consequently were unable to provide Mrs. Grimm with any tittle-tattle. But since her other clients more than made up for this dereliction, Mrs. Grimm did not complain.

An early Wednesday made an awful blunder, accusing Mrs. Grimm of having designs on her husband, the information supplied by Wednesday's neighbor, an unstable, envious woman who couldn't keep cleaning women for more than two months at a time.

Well, Mrs. Grimm was furious, mad as a hornet. To think that she, Judith Welcome Grimm, would . . . would . . . she could hardly talk she was so mad . . . would think of looking at . . . that . . . that sawed-off, henpecked, browbeaten little . . . little pipsqueak of a husband . . . well . . . With that she left, right there, leaving behind a half-finished lamb chop and a custard pie, to say nothing of a horrified, hysterical woman, realization having dawned that, between her milksop of a husband and the quintessential Mrs. Grimm, it was no contest.

That's the way things went as the years flew by. By May, 1983, Mrs. Grimm was an institution in West Hampshire. She had five clients, all of whom considered themselves extremely fortunate to be able to boast that Mrs. Grimm was their cleaning woman. Her going wage was twelve dollars an hour (seventy-two dollars a day for a six hour day), and since her house had been paid for for years and since there was only herself to feed and clothe, one would think that Mrs. Grimm was well off. Not so. Although the little Cape Cod had no mortgage, it had other afflictions. It had needed a new roof in 1972; the roots of a sugar maple tree ruined the foundation back in 1978; termites had gnawed away half the kitchen before being discovered. And a ne'er-do-well brother appeared on schedule, like

the seven year locust, out of work, down in the dumps, needing a substantial handout. And there were other expenses, all of which impeded her plan to save enough money to buy a van, the necessary equipment, hire five or six cleaning women, become an entrepreneur.

Thwarted in her laudable desire to rise in the house cleaning profession, Mrs. Grimm turned to literature, hoping to hit the jackpot in one fell swoop. A voracious reader of romance novels, a straight-A student theme writer in high school, it dawned on Mrs. Grimm one bleak wintry day—a grey, gloomy Saturday—in 1981 that, by God, why not write a book? My God, why not?

Why not, indeed. Everyone is always saying, "I could write a book." Go ahead. Try it. Mrs. Grimm tried and succeeded, but she bled blood, cried, wailed, suffered untold agonies, grimly spending at least two hours every night, all her weekends—she gave up the occasional movie, the Saturday trip to the mall, even church. It took a while for her typing to come back, her grammar had fallen by the wayside, and she had become addicted to TV over the years (this, giving up TV—the withdrawal—was the worst, just excruciating). She finally, desperate, gave her set to the people at Goodwill, the dear woman.

Of course she was smart enough to write about the subject she knew best, Regency England around 1820, her vast knowledge having been gained from hundreds and hundreds of bodice rippers. Finished in 1982, almost a year from the day she began, *The Spark Becomes a Flame* (it beat out *Passion's Fragile Flower*) fizzled out long before anyone thought of calling the fire department, the first would-be publisher returning the manuscript unopened, four dollars and seventy-eight cents' postage due. And the second—Mrs. Grimm did everything right this time—dispatched it back within three weeks with a one line rejection slip stating that unsolicited manuscripts were no longer being accepted, only those submitted through an agent would be considered. Have a nice day.

Poor Mrs. Grimm. She was beginning to realize what Dickens had gone through. But the brave woman had perseverance. She went to the library, located a list of literary agents, wrote to fifteen enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope. Two replied. One said thanks but no thanks, already have enough clients. Have a nice day. The other wrote to say that since Mrs. Grimm fell into the category of beginners his agency would have to charge two hundred dollars for a comprehensive evaluation of her novel, *The Spark Becomes a Flame*.

Poor Mrs. Grimm—she had thought that writing the novel would be the toughest part—what could she do? She was stuck. She sent the manuscript and a check and spent the next two weeks alternating between abysmal foreboding and wild optimism, with foreboding having a clear edge.

Back it came, poor little (little?) two hundred ninety-eight pages of blood, sweat, and tears. *The Spark Becomes a Flame* was somewhat frayed around the edges by now and beginning to whimper at being so ruthlessly rejected, the poor thing.

The agent minced no words ("I'd advise you to sit down, Mrs. Grimm," he began, "this is going to hurt.") It hurt, cut to the bone, right through all that well-roundedness, the poor woman. *The Spark Becomes a Flame* was hopeless, a total, complete, superlative failure. The writing was stilted, hackneyed phrases abounded, the characters were stock, a dime-a-dozen collection from the bottom of the barrel. Poor Mrs. Grimm, her nineteen-year-old raven-haired orphan virgin, the handsome new curate at St. Swithin's, the brooding lord of the manor, the mysterious stranger in the purple cloak seen skulking from the pub at closing time, the dear widowed librarian, the town's lovable gossip, "the whole unbelievable lot, a motley bunch of third-raters likely picked up on the fourth day of a bankruptcy sale at the five and dime." As for the plotting, forget it, words are inadequate to describe it. And what in God's name had possessed Mrs. Grimm to write of Regency England, she a nurse in a small New England town (Mrs. Grimm not wanting to admit that she was a mere cleaning woman). The fundamental rule for all beginning writers is write of what you know.

That was about it, except that the agent concluded by saying that "lurking behind the idiotic dialogue, the clumsy plotting, the inept sentence structure, etc., lies the faintest wee flicker of a flame . . . don't get your hopes up—it's just a flicker of talent, a mere sliver. So, if you want to try again, Mrs. Grimm, I'll be glad to try with you, not forgetting, of course, my fee. Good luck, have a nice day."

Nothing will be gained by dwelling on poor Mrs. Grimm's . . . well, suffice it to say that she sank deep into the Slough of Despond, and who could blame her. But life went on, dust accumulated in corners, the carpets had to be vacuumed, the kitchen floors scrubbed, every last little ink dot spider ("How do you think they get in, Mrs. Grimm?" "Beats me.") ruthlessly searched out and squashed.

Meantime, Grace Peabody Thornhill, also a would-be novelist, was having no more success than Mrs. Grimm, and she had been

at it years longer than Mrs. Grimm. In fact, she had written four novels, all in the style of Henry James, full of long, involved sentences with ne'er a dangling participle nor a split infinitive but with all too many unnecessary philosophical asides. Mrs. Thornhill's agent—a Boston friend of the late Mr. Thornhill—kept imploring her to come out of the clouds, get down to earth, write the kind of stuff that sells, the eternal triangle, sex, duplicity, sex, vulgarity, pride, covetousness, gluttony, envy, anger, sloth, lust . . . that's what sells.

"In other words, trash," said Mrs. Thornhill bitterly when the fourth novel came back.

Of course Mrs. Grimm knew of Mrs. Thornhill's writing. In fact, several years back, before Mrs. Grimm had thought of becoming an author, the postman had delivered a bulky package, a returned manuscript, while Mrs. Grimm was at work in the front room.

"You see here, Judith, a writer manquée."

To which Mrs. Grimm, who had never heard the expression but who guessed that it meant no sale, said, "That's too bad, Mrs. Thornhill. Better luck next time."

Now there were two—who knows how many more—writers manquée in West Hampshire. But all the while gossip flourished. Monday's daughter's husband came crawling back, begging forgiveness (the blonde had ditched him, a richer sucker having sprouted). The daughter was adamant but Monday gave her holy hell, telling her she couldn't stand the three brats any longer. That hurt, daughter and the kids leaving in a huff.

"And," said Mrs. Grimm, "didn't the garbage disposal clog up next morning. Had to call Johnny, the goodlooking young plumber."

"Tish tish," tish-tished Mrs. Thornhill, her usual stunning self across the kitchen table, Mrs. Grimm temporarily at peace with the world, the mammoth shrimp salad and the luscious custard pie still lingering in inward bliss.

Thursday had become reconciled to her husband's mad plan to raise catfish, he off to check on a catfish farm in Mississippi. That gave Thursday the opportunity to inspect the burgeoning chrysanthemums in the greenhouse, Tommy conducting the tour.

"Which took a good two hours," Mrs. Grimm said. "And . . . she tried to sneak past me but no go . . . not only were there poor little crushed chrysanthemums in her hair but her back was covered with them."

"My goodness," said Mrs. Thornhill, shaking her superlatively coiffed blonde hair. "My goodness."

As for Friday, said Mrs. Grimm, well . . . it's hard to believe.
"Oh?"

"It is. She gave her yoga instructor, the Indian, two of her credit cards, the big one which allows you to get cash from the bank, and another one. He said he needed tires for his Volvo and he wasn't sure which credit card the tire people would take."

"Oh my goodness," gasped Mrs. Thornhill, "I can almost predict what happened."

"And you'd be right, exactly right. He got two thousand dollars from the bank and ran up over three thousand on the other card and vamoosed."

"Oh, the poor woman, oh my. How is she taking it, Judith?"

"Not good, Mrs. Thornhill, not good at all. In fact she says she's going to have herself declared incompetent, claiming she just has to be . . . well, the way she puts it is 'I'm nothing but the female equivalent of the dirty old man, I just can't resist falling for every . . .' Then she stopped, wailed for a good ten minutes, me, I, patting her on the shoulder and saying, 'It can't be that bad, Mrs. Gregory.' Finally she stopped crying. Looking up at me and almost whispering, 'Mrs. Grimm, I know what I'm going to do.' And I said, 'What, Mrs. Gregory?' And she said 'I'm going to repent for my infamous, disgusting behavior ever since poor Walter died'—that was hubby—'nine years ago.' And I asked how she was going to do that. Guess what she said?"

"I have no idea, Judith," replied Mrs. Thornhill, quite enchanted with the tale. "Tell me quickly."

"Well . . . this'll kill you. She said she was going to become a nun. Ha."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do. But that isn't all. By then I was behind with my work and I left her to her misery. Two hours later . . . time to go . . . guess what?"

"She had abandoned going to the nunnery," suggested Mrs. Thornhill, smiling a lovely smile, making her even more attractive than usual, "and . . . well, let's see . . . she's . . . now where would there be a lot of men . . . where . . . oh, let's say she is contemplating going back to college. Am I close?"

Not exactly, for when Mrs. Grimm came downstairs there was Friday going through the yellow pages looking for a karate school that made house calls.

"Well, it's a sad commentary on our age," said Mrs. Thornhill. "Ah," and here Mrs. Thornhill, as Mrs. Grimm was quick to note,

engaged in one of those pregnant pauses so often encountered in novice writing (in *The Spark Becomes a Flame* the barmaid at the Boar's Head says to the mysterious stranger in the purple cloak, "'And what'll yours be, sir?' There was a pregnant pause . . ."), and then said, "how are things at your Tuesday, Judith?"

Well, there was a second pregnant pause as Judith became quite flustered, turning several quick hues, the last a fiery purple. This was a new hue, previous hues, on recent Wednesdays, having been pink, peach, peony.

"Ah, well, you know," stammered Mrs. Grimm, "he, he, that is, he keeps busy doing woodworking and I don't see much of him. Mostly he's making birdhouses. He already has seven or eight out back. That man must spend twenty dollars a week on birdseed and it's not even winter yet . . . ah . . . oh my, look at the time . . ."

But Mrs. Thornhill wasn't going to let her get away this time.

"Stay a while, Judith," she said, and Mrs. Grimm, looking uncomfortable, eased back into her chair. "About lunch. Does he . . . well, does he have a lunch ready . . . and do you and he . . . well, talk like we do?"

Poor Mrs. Grimm, Judith, not only had the cat suddenly gotten her tongue but there was a frog in her throat, it being obvious to her that Mrs. Thornhill had a bee in her bonnet regarding Tuesday.

"Well . . . you know . . . it's . . . ah," stuttered Mrs. Grimm, a rainbow of hues dancing on her chubby cheeks, "I, ah, I bring my lunch. He's pretty busy and . . . well, he stops, ah, once in a while to have a cup of coffee. Now, Mrs. Thornhill, I just have to go . . . I'm way behind."

"H'mmmmm," h'mmmmed Mrs. Thornhill after Judith had hurried out of the kitchen. There is something afoot. Our Judith is obviously smitten by her Tuesday. And, thought Mrs. Thornhill, I wish her all the luck in the world. She deserves it. And she meant it. For she was a kind, compassionate person, a top contributor to dozens of charitable organizations and to many environmental causes, an upstanding person.

But she was a woman, with a woman's natural curiosity (will the security people try to restrain those vehement feminists in the rear of the hall . . . thank you), with mankind's natural curiosity, and had become quite intrigued with Mrs. Grimm's Tuesday. What did he look like? Was he tall, short, fat, thin, bald?

Why don't I drop him a line, now that I know he's interested in birds, she thought. Which she did, the next morning (of course she knew his name from Mrs. Grimm's side of the kitchen table), en-

closing an application to join the local branch of the Audubon Society. One birder—Mrs. Thornhill was president of the local branch—to another.

That afternoon, Thursday, as Mrs. Thornhill was rather listlessly at work on another effort to write the great American novel, her hands suddenly stopped above the typewriter as a powerful bolt from the blue, a screaming afflatus, almost knocked her off the chair.

Ten minutes later, still wildly excited, she began *A Flawed Utopia*, hastily chosen over *Weeds Among the Marigolds* and *What the Cleaning Woman Knew*.

"If it's trash they want, I'll give it to them. I'm sick and tired of the girls asking in that sneaky, gloating fashion, 'And how's the new novel coming, Grace?'"

Let me see now, thought Mrs. Thornhill as inspiration throbbed and seethed within, the certainty of lawsuits tossed lightly aside, what would be an appropriate name for Judith? What about something like Ethel Barnswallow, that's it. Thus Mrs. Grimm, Judith, became Ethel Barnswallow, "cleaning woman *par excellence*, a tall, somewhat overweight woman in her middle fifties, a widow of long standing, with a rather pretty face except for a rather prominent nose. Possessed of a healthy predilection for gossip, Mrs. Barnswallow is East Wakefield's superlative quidnunc, the infallible conduit for all the hidden shamelessness, the awe-inspiring iniquity, for all 'shocks that flesh is heir to' that simmer and seethe beneath the deceptively serene surface of this staid, impeccable, righteous—there are twenty-six churches—lovely, leafy old-money town of thirty-five thousand citizens nestled in the beautiful Berkshires of Massachusetts.

"Hut damn, hut damn," exulted Mrs. Thornhill, sinking into the vernacular in her teeming excitement, "this is it. It can't miss. Why, I have enough dirt for four novels. But I'll only write this one. Then, my name equated with bestsellerdom—hey, why not a *nom de plume*? Once I attain, reach, the best seller list, I can demand that the publisher publish my real literature. Granted, it's a foul, ugly way to achieve the status of a serious writer, but I've spent twenty years writing and the hell with my nagging conscience. I won't let this last chance slip by, I won't."

Over the weekend Mrs. Grimm was also suddenly hit right between the eyes—bang-bang-bang—with her own bolt from the blue.

"My God, my God," she gasped, "that's it. Write about what you know. Isn't that what that . . . that . . . damn agent said. Hell, I've

got enough dirt to fill four books. . . . Holy smoke, what a nitwit I've been. Here I'm sittin' on a gold mine and didn't know it. . . . Jesus, Mary, and Jospheh, I'd be rich. Get my nose fixed, losé weight. . . . 'And here she is, the famous author, Judith Welcome Grimm, isn't she beautiful!' Yes, I do have a mini-series in the works. . . . My God. Oh boy."

Alas, it was not to be. By late Sunday night Mrs. Grimm, teary-eyed at having lost out on fame and fortune, was back abed making notes for another bodice ripper, *Only the Embers* ("Would the autumn winds, blowing over the bleak moors, serve to reignite the once flaming passion that had all but consumed young Lord Atherton and the raven-haired girl Lydia, she of the swanlike neck and the ivory bosom? And what of the mysterious stranger in the purple cloak seen skulking from the Boar's Head just before time was called?" Poor Judith just couldn't get rid of that pest. He kept turning up every time she paused to look up a word in the dictionary.).

Her conscience, after a stormy battle, had triumphed. Even changing the names to protect the innocent, and writing under a pseudonym, she just couldn't do it. She didn't even think about the lawsuits that would be likely no matter what. Take Thursday, a grandmother, with three little grandchildren: Courtney, age eight, Joanna, age seven, and Jonathan, age five. What would they, and her daughter, son-in-law think of G-Ma, trysting with Tommy among the begonias and the African violets?

And there was Friday, another grandmother, a churchgoer. And didn't she give Judith a fifty dollar present every year? And have you forgotten, her outraged conscience demanded, that not only does she have a nephew who is a priest, a niece who is a nun, but there were Uncle Willie and Aunt Maude, bravely going down on the *Titanic*, arm in arm, singing "Nearer My God to Thee." Would you desecrate the memory of Uncle Willie and Aunt Maude?

Poor Mrs. Grimm, what could she do? Try to rekindle the embers, the poor woman.

The summer passed. Mrs. Grimm kept her clients informed—except Tuesday, who usually had only a brief word about the weather and birds, the dear, wonderful, divine man. Mrs. Thornhill stayed glued to her typewriter, *A Flawed Utopia* humming right along, a heavenly flow on every other page.

Unable to dredge any real information about Judith's Tuesday from her, Mrs. Thornhill had taken to riding past the picturesque eight room clapboard house at 456 Chestnut Street once in a while.

She hit the jackpot on a morning in early October, Indian summer in glorious cloak.

"My God, my God," she gasped, almost running into the ditch to the right of the street. "Will wonders never cease. . . . Who would have believed it?" Who indeed, for what she had seen was Mrs. Grimm, trying to hide her substantial bulk behind some high-backed porch chairs and almost succeeding, Mrs. Grimm cleaning windows.

Back at her condo, at work once more on *A Flawed Utopia*, Mrs. Thornhill just couldn't get the incredible scene at 456 Chestnut Street out of her mind. Finally, she gave in, it had to be included. Just had to be. I'll make it poignant, pathetic—we all have a price—the lonely widowed cleaning woman abandoning pride, dignity, her standing in the community, throwing her hard-won reputation to the four winds all for a hopeless infatuation, the poor creature.

It should be noted that on writing the above Mrs. Thornhill felt rather severe twinges of shame, as well she should, for making fun of Mrs. Grimm, her Judith. But she had twinged and panged and throed ever since the start of *A Flawed Utopia*. Ridiculing close friends, neighbors, pillars of the community, even though names, hair color, ages, etc., had been changed. But she had gritted her straight white teeth and plunged ahead, insisting that once she made the best seller lists she would turn over all of her royalties to charity and then write real literature. If she weren't sued. People would understand.

Mrs. Thornhill finally met Mrs. Grimm's Tuesday on an evening in late November, the occasion being the final meeting of the West Hampshire branch of the Audubon Society prior to the Christmas Week bird count (each Christmas Week, just before or just after Christmas, the Audubon Society conducts a continent-wide bird census to determine how the various species are faring in this inconsiderate world).

"My God," gasped Mrs. Thornhill, stunning as always, as she looked across the crowded conference room of the town library and spied a tall, slender, brown-haired man in a heavy windbreaker standing in uncertain slouch in the doorway. He appeared on the verge of turning to leave.

Poor tweedy Agatha Harding, Grace's partner for the last ten years—she had been talking to Grace, but when Grace spied the tall, handsome stranger, she rudely shoved Agatha out of the way and made undignified haste to the doorway.

"Well, what do you think of that," exclaimed Agatha, quite miffed. "Just because she's president of the local branch doesn't mean she can treat me like that. I want an explanation."

She got it, Grace in soothing voice explaining that Mr. Anthony Colinwood was a birder, and as befitting her role as president of the local birders, she thought it only right that she indoctrinate him into the particular methods used by the West Hampshire branch during the Christmas Week count. This was a bare-faced lie, since Anthony had explained to Grace, as she dragged him into the room, that he and his late wife had gone on many Christmas Week counts. Agatha remained sternly unmollified until Grace volunteered to make a substantial contribution to Agatha's favorite project, the extension of the biking path to Hawthorne Pond.

Came the Christmas Week count, held the day before Christmas. Agatha had a bad day. Given ex-Judge Hepplewaite, a crusty, know-it-all octogenarian as her partner, she spent a cold, miserable day trudging through snowdrifts while his ex-Honor remained warm and cosy in Agatha's station wagon, from which vantage point he contributed three commonplace species—starlings, house sparrows, cardinals—to their total count of twenty-six species.

When the pale sun set on the grey, gloomy, frozen day the birders met back at the library for hot food and hot drinks and to total up. It was a good year, fifty-two species having been counted. And when Grace Peabody Thornhill, her cheeks aglow, her blonde hair (dyed, you know, but . . .) in delightful disarray, her slim, provocative body attired in a white ski suit, arose to announce proudly that she and her partner, Mr. Anthony Colinwood, "a new member, recently moved here from Ohio," had seen a really rare bird, a genuine *rara avis*, an authentic Tennessee warbler (*Vermivora peregrina*—the only warbler except Lucy's with completely white underparts; voice: staccato, see-see-see-see-see ending in trill; winters in Central and South America), the entire group, with one exception, shouted, "Good save . . . good save . . . good save." Of course it was Agatha Harding who didn't join in. Who could blame her, deprived of sharing first prize, a meal for two at the Fireside, West Hampshire's best restaurant.

It had been a divine, cold, lovely, grey, wonderful, snowy day for Grace. She had finally met someone who thrilled her as she hadn't been thrilled since the boy that got away (George, rich George, married on the rebound, had provided very few thrills). Oh, it had been wonderful; she and Tony—they were on a first-name basis from the moment they each tripped over a snow-covered log and

went pellmell into a snowdrift—birding through wind and snow, had counted exactly thirty-six species, an exceptional day considering the brutal elements.

And sitting almost knee to knee in her warm, cosy Mercedes, parked on an isolated country lane, snow everywhere, the radio playing Golden Oldies from the '50's, sharing Angelo's Audubon Special lunch from the hamper, he had talked shyly of his life before West Hampshire. He had taught engineering at a small Ohio college and had taken early retirement after his wife's death three years ago. There were no children. Remaining in their Ohio home had gotten too difficult—memories were everywhere—so he had sold the house and, after looking at many possible retirement places, he had fallen in love with West Hampshire.

All this and more was said, with a shy, boyish smile, and it took a mighty effort on Grace's part to refrain from grabbing him and clutching him to her in a wild, passionate embrace.

No wonder poor Judith does his windows. How I envy her. I would adore doing them for him. And his laundry, too. I wonder if Judith does his laundry ("Oh no, Mrs. Grimm, I wouldn't think of that. Why, you're already doing too much for me. No, no, I'll keep sending it out . . . but I do appreciate your offer. Thank you.").

The bird count had taken place, on Saturday, the day before Christmas, and Mrs. Grimm singing blissfully, had spent her day on cloud nine, over a hot stove, preparing a surprise turkey dinner for Tony (he was Tony in her dreams, her hopes, Mr. Colinwood on Tuesdays).

She began phoning him around five to tell him that she would be over on Christmas with a little present. Besides the turkey and all the trimmings, a total of four hundred seventy-five dollars had gone into a permanent, a new dress with a décolletage more than adequate for Mrs. Grimm's purpose, a new winter coat, new shoes, and a lightweight, expandable foundation garment. Naturally, she had felt deep qualms about spending that kind of money on herself instead of on new storm windows. But she told herself that it was now or never. This is it. Strike while the iron is hot. Faint heart ne'er won fair lady, and vice versa. After all, the poor man hasn't been with a woman for God knows how long. And vice versa again, she thought wryly.

Woe was she, it didn't work. He finally answered the phone around eight o'clock. "Oh my," he said, "I'm so sorry . . . and how kind of you, Mrs. Grimm, to think of bringing me a present . . . how kind . . . but I'm leaving tomorrow morning on the commuter flight

to Boston and then on to Pittsburgh. . . . Spending a few days with an old college friend and his wife. . . . I'll be back Tuesday night. . . . Ah, would it, that is, would it be inconvenient for you to mail the . . . present, Mrs. Grimm?"

"It's . . . ah . . . not exactly mailable," said poor Mrs. Grimm, totally devastated. "But . . . I'll see if . . . I can . . . oh, you'll have to excuse me . . . I smell something burning . . . ah . . . Merry Christmas."

"You, too, Mrs. Grimm . . . and . . . well . . . I mean it."

That wasn't all, more woe was she; rue, too; the phone ringing almost before the poor woman could creep to the sofa, the something burning a sad ruse. Monday was on the phone, she a close friend of Agatha Harding, tweedy birder. Was Judith aware that her Tuesday and her Wednesday had been birding partners, all alone for nearly eight hours, on today's annual Audubon bird count?

Poor Judith. She moaned. Monday, hurrying right along as she had to get this news out to five or six others, explained that Judith's Tuesday had gone to the November meeting where final arrangements were made and Agatha said—today she said it—that Grace Thornhill had made a spectacle of herself in literally shoving poor Agatha aside. "All the birders were quite shocked, Judith," went on Monday, gathering steam, "for after all, as we all know, Grace Thornhill is always so refined, so imperious, so . . . well, anyway, Judith, Grace told poor Agatha categorically back at the November meeting that your Tuesday was to be Grace's partner during the Christmas Week count. Naturally poor Agatha was upset. After all . . . well, I thought you'd like to know, Judith, and, oh my goodness, I almost forgot, there's other news, terrible news. The elusive robber who has been burglarizing homes in our section of the town for the past six or seven months has struck again. . . . Poor Martha Henderson came home from the theater last night to find that she had been robbed of all of her jewels and thousands of dollars' worth of heirloom silver. Wouldn't you think the police could have caught this robber long before now?"

The hell with the police, Mrs. Grimm felt like screaming. The hell with Martha Henderson. The hell with all of you rich bastards. I hope the thief gets you next . . . but she gritted her teeth and said, "Thanks for calling. . . . Ah, I'm not feeling too well. . . . I don't think I'll be in on Monday."

Oh, that was too bad.

"You must be getting what's been going around, Judith, you poor girl."

There was a little more. Not much, Merry Christmas back and forth and Happy New Year, too.

Poor Mrs. Grimm. She wrapped the turkey and all the trimmings in plastic, put it in a box, took it down to the Salvation Army early Christmas morning (Salvation Army, feeding people in such a rich place as West Hampshire?—hah, look around). Bless you, the good people at the Salvation Army said, bless you. Then Mrs. Grimm went home and microwaved a chicken pot pie for dinner. She was alone. She had brought it on herself, her writing schedule had gradually eliminated her friends, leaving her too proud to phone one of them on Christmas and suggest a get-together and an old-time gossip session.

On Monday, outfitted in her second best battle gear, she took the lovely red coat back to Feinstein's in the mall. It took nearly an hour to fight her way up to the returned-goods counter, and when the harassed, greyhaired female clerk asked why the coat was being returned, Mrs. Grimm snarled, "It was the wrong color for the funeral. Now give me the credit slip and shut up." And when the woman turned red, poor Mrs. Grimm whispered a sincere apology.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I really am . . . I'm . . . just not myself today."

"None of us is," the woman said, managing a bleak smile.

Tight-lipped, chin out, bundled against the cold (it was two below), Mrs. Grimm used her key to enter Tuesday's house around nine, an hour later than usual. She raced through the place like a house afire, trying, and failing, to ignore all the many, many little things that reminded her of him. She skipped lunch. She was home by two thirty. Lay down on the couch and went to sleep. She was awakened around six by the phone ringing. It was Mrs. Thornhill. She was taking the early commuter to Boston and wouldn't be home until late in the evening. Did Mrs. Grimm still have the keys?

Of course she did, Mrs. Thornhill knew that.

"Yes," she said.

"Fine. Well, Judith, the check will be on the kitchen table and there is a nice shrimp salad in the refrigerator. I had Angelo deliver it today . . . meantime, Judith, Happy New Year."

"Same to you . . . Mrs. Thornhill," Mrs. Grimm replied, trying to stay mad at her but finding it difficult, the hundred dollar Christmas present of last week looming large before her.

Wednesday proved momentous. Mrs. Grimm, deliberately late,

arrived at the luxurious condo building at nine. She used one of the keys to open the outside door, which let her into the lobby. Used the other key to open Mrs. Thornhill's condo, the first to the right off the lobby.

Fierce pride in her workmanship outweighing the natural human determination to repay Mrs. Thornhill for her perfidy in stealing her Tuesday by ignoring a speck of dust here, a cobweb there ("Imagine, Judith, a little cobweb in winter. How do you think they get in, the spiders?" "Beats me, Mrs. Thornhill."), Mrs. Grimm attacked the speck of dust, the wee flimsy cobweb, the cracker crumbs near the TV, with grim gusto. By lunchtime she was finished with everything but Mrs. Thornhill's study. Hunger gnawing, she toasted two slices of bread and made a cup of coffee, after which she flung open the refrigerator, grabbed the poor huge shrimp salad, threw it into the plastic bag lining the kitchen garbage pail.

It was here that His Nibs, Old Harry, finally, at long last—he had been tempting Mrs. Grimm for all of her housecleaning years—sixteen of them—succeeded ("Steal something, peep into the diary, filch a sterling silver spoon—they'll never miss it—don't turn in that ten dollar bill you found under the chair, you idiot," he had whispered for years, to no avail.).

"H'mm," thought the Tempter that cold wintry day. "She's ripe for temptation . . . it's now or never. . . ." Then . . . "Pssst, Mrs. Grimm, over here. . . . The desk . . . look in the bottom drawer on the right side . . . go ahead . . . what has your stupid highmind-edness gotten you? . . . pssst . . . go ahead, the bottom drawer on the right."

Poor Mrs. Grimm—not her usual incorruptible self—succumbed.

When Mrs. Thornhill entered her condo around eight that night, carrying a garment bag containing twelve hundred fifty dollars' worth of dresses—three—she was in a joyous mood. Dinner tomorrow night at the Fireside with wonderful, adorable Tony. It wasn't until she was about to retire that she happened to notice that Judith had neglected to empty the wastebasket in her study. That's unusual, she thought. Well, what's the difference . . . tra la la . . . tra la . . . la . . . la . . . life is good . . . tra la la la la. Wait till Tony sees me in this dress . . . tra la la la la.

Yes, Mrs. Grimm had read—not all, she had to skip a lot of pages—*A Flawed Utopia*, currently up to page two hundred forty-six and approaching The End. It began with a statement that "the things that went on in the bastion of upper class self-righteousness, the smugly virtuous, picturesque New England town of East Wake-

field shall be unflinchingly documented here, and when it is all recorded, there could very well exist the strong possibility that Cotton Mather will not only turn over in his grave but will have burrowed his way up through the ground and raced to the nearest pulpit, there to fulminate against the abominable goings-on in East Wakefield and, in lowered, shamed voice, apologize to the witches of Salem, poor, pathetic minor-leaguers in the sophisticated world of upper class transgression."

Back home, Mrs. Grimm—mad as hell, fuming, steaming, cursing—furiously sloshed down the beer at the kitchen table, vowing vengeance. It was bad enough that *A Flawed Utopia* was a cesspool of . . . of . . . filth and . . . words failed her . . . but, worse . . . there was Ethel Barnswallow ("Why not Ethel Scarecrow?" Mrs. Grimm hissed) with her "aquiline nose" ("Oh, my God," moaned Mrs. Grimm, remembering this, she had always been oversensitive about her nose—which wasn't that bad really) "and her one hundred sixty-two pounds" ("Damn you to hell and back, it's only one fifty-eight" . . . Now, now, Mrs. Grimm, let's not sink to her level—you know you've turned the scale back), "of the type of semi-voluptuousness that some men find irresistible." Ha, she slipped up, paid me an underhanded compliment. . . . Mrs. Grimm had learned that she was a quidnunc (she had to look that up when she got home), that she ate a lot, talked a lot, and my God, my God, worst of all was a fraud, said in not so many words, but the meaning was clear. . . . "For she too, like most of the closet reprobates in East Wakefield, had a secret sin—contrary to her proud boast that she didn't do windows, didn't have to, would be insulted if even asked if she did them, she, madly in (unrequited) love, had thrown her reputation to the four winds and had been seen doing windows for a handsome widower, the poor dear obsessed creature."

Poor Mrs. Grimm, she didn't sleep very well Wednesday night. She had quaffed eight cans of beer, four times her daily quota. Her head ached, her stomach growled, her heart was broken. She would have to leave town. Her reputation was ruined. I wonder what I can get for the house, she moaned. It's a rotten world. How could Mrs. Thornhill do that to me? I thought she liked me. How little we know, she whimpered.

Thursday dawned bleak, mean, wintry, a snarling wind blowing snow. The little Cape Cod house shook. Mrs. Grimm awoke at nine, staggered downstairs, drank two cups of black coffee, and, remembering that it was Thursday, crept to the phone to call Thursday

and groaned that she wasn't feeling too well, wouldn't be in, sorry.

Thursday was very sympathetic, commiserating at length about there being a lot of that going around. Happy New Year, Judith. Thanks, same to you.

By four that afternoon the storm had subsided, a weak sun glistened on the snowy town, and Mrs. Grimm, the worst over, had determined to fight back. She was going to steal the manuscript of *A Flawed Utopia*, carbon copy and all. Thursday night was Mrs. Thornhill's bridge night at the country club, eight of the girls getting together for spirited combat.

The day had crept by, an inch at a time. Finally it was seven o'clock, time for the first deal at the country club. Mrs. Grimm waited until seven thirty. Bundled up, she drove the two miles from her less affluent part of town to the rich part of town. She parked a block away from Mrs. Thornhill's condo building. She started down the street, the snow crunching underfoot. She stopped. I can't do it, I can't do it, she told herself. Sure, she made fun of me. Sure, I'll be the laughingstock of the town. And I'll just have to leave . . . I'll have to. But . . . I can't commit a crime. She'll know right away. . . . "Mrs. Grimm, my manuscript is missing . . . did you, that is, I must ask . . . are you responsible?" What's the use? I'm finished. Might as well admit it.

She was on the verge of turning back when a car pulled up in front of the building. There were two street lights in front, and Mrs. Grimm had no trouble recognizing the car . . . nor the tall, slender, well-dressed man who got out and hurried up the steps, pressed the proper button, waited for the door to be opened, went in.

Snowflakes buffeted her as she stood on the walk, unable to move. She wanted to die, fade away, disappear. It seemed an eternity before the condo front door opened and two figures came out. Laughter rang through the cold air. She was wearing the full-length mink. She was holding onto him. He was looking down at her.

The car started, the headlights came on, Mrs. Grimm was galvanized into action. She turned quickly. Keeping close to the snow-covered hedges on her right, shielding her ice cold face with her hand from the street, she began walking quickly back toward her car. There was a knife in her heart, a huge void in her stomach, and a small, funny little icicle hanging from her nose, a miniature stalactite, the poor dear woman.

"Oh, Tony, look at that poor thing," said Grace, with genuine pity—one can afford pity when one is wearing a full-length mink. "I hope she doesn't have far to go."

"Let's hope she's almost home, Grace," said Tony, meaning it. Then the car turned the corner, out of sight, bound for the Fireside, and the first prize for having seen the dear little shivery see-see-see-see-see Tennessee warbler, *Vermivora peregrina* . . . good save . . . good save . . . good save.

The moment the car turned the corner, Mrs. Grimm turned also, her whole being seething with fury. No bridge tonight, she snarled, and didn't they look rich bitchy . . . well, I've had enough.

She was back home with both copies of *A Flawed Utopia* fifteen minutes later. The street lights in front of the building had worried her most. But she had finally plunged ahead. Now, warm at last, a cold beer in her shaky hand, she turned to page one. She gasped, quailed, cursed, cowered, cringed, cursed through page after page, even cried.

Of course the names had been changed to protect the innocent, or so Mrs. Thornhill thought, but there was Thursday deep in botanical experimenting with "Petey, a young, dark, curly-haired, semiliterate, musclebound hunk of steamy virility who when asked by his golden-age nymphomaniac if he had ever heard of Luther Burbank, smiled his lascivious smile and replied, 'Sure. He played shortstop for the Red Sox fifteen, twenty years ago, right?'"

There was Monday, strapping young plumber's apprentice beside her, the leak in the water bed repaired, something brewing. And Friday, brave, splendid Uncle Willie and Aunt Maude in their cold Atlantic grave, staining the family shield by cavorting behind closed doors with a Yugoslavian purple belt karate expert who wore his prized purple belt and little more. Oh my God, wailed poor Mrs. Grimm, it's all my fault, me and my big mouth, quid-nuncing all over town. Oh my God.

More earthy expletives spewed forth as a seething, beer-guzzling Mrs. Grimm followed her alter ego, blabber-mouthed Ethel, through page after page of snooping, peeping, listening, prying, tittle-tattling. Actually, an objective reader would have found Ethel Barnswallow a rather poignant, wistful, melancholy character, one longing for happiness, her predilection for gossip merely an outlet for thwarted hopes and, even more, a means of helping her, for the moment, to feel superior to her clients, she the dominant personality with her extensive exposure to the foibles of East Wake-

field's elite, they, her eager listeners, secondary players in the drama.

Naturally Mrs. Grimm saw it differently, and she wasn't too far off, for Mrs. Thornhill, resorting to a favorite trick of authors, the insidious hyperbole, exaggerated Ethel's activities by having her spend most of her time poking into things she shouldn't have poked into, digging out the dirt, when the real dirt—no wonder there were so many loose little dotty spiders thriving—piled up "in small mounds as Ethel ignored mildew, mold, smut, smudge, and stain, concentrating on accumulating a veritable treasure trove of exquisite tittle-tattle which she loved to share with her other clients. One can say without fear or hesitation that Mrs. Barnswallow, the poor dear creature, had a nose for news."

That did it. That did it. Mrs. Grimm, the seventh beer sloshing within, went completely berserk. She leaped up, taking five or six pages with her, she tried to tear them apart with her strong teeth. To no avail. She ran to the small room off her bedroom where she did her sewing. Rushed back with the large scissors. Grabbed the plastic garbage pail with its plastic-bag liner. Cursing, fuming, mad as hell, she cut *A Flawed Utopia*—carbon copy and all—into hundreds of pieces. It took a good half hour. Then, it must have been after five in the morning, she staggered outside, with nothing but her bedroom slippers and her coat thrown over her nightgown, and deposited the tied bag at the curb, it being her garbage pickup day.

Friday phoned at nine. Mrs. Grimm fumbled for the phone. She croaked a raspy "hello." Friday had planned on asking why Judith had failed to show up. But on hearing the awful hello she promptly went into a burst of deep sympathy, saying she fully understood that Judith had gotten what was going around. To which Mrs. Grimm grunted yeah . . . and thanks for calling, and hung up.

The police phoned ten minutes later. When the strong, manly voice on the phone identified himself as Sergeant Such-and-such of the West Hampshire police department, Mrs. Grimm, smothering an agonized cry, sat up in her bed as if propelled by a rocket. Dear Lord, she moaned inwardly. My God, she's found her manuscript missing. My God . . . I must have been crazy . . . I'm ruined . . . ruined . . . can I claim libel? . . . Maybe a good lawyer will get me off with . . . oh my God . . . what came over me . . . oh my God, at my age . . . I'll die before I'll go to jail—I couldn't stand it.

"Mrs. Grimm," the sergeant asked. "Are you there?"

"Yes," she managed to bleat.

Good, well, this was going to be a shock, but, well, the sergeant had bad news. Mrs. Thornhill had been murdered and the police . . .

"WHAT . . . WHAT'S THAT . . . WHAT?" she screamed.

The sergeant repeated it, calmly. Mrs. Thornhill had apparently come home and interrupted an intruder who was robbing her condo. Unfortunately, in the struggle that ensued, the robber hit Mrs. Thornhill with a blunt object. Ah . . . the police would appreciate Mrs. Grimm's coming over to the Sylvan Heights condo building and assisting in determining just what, if anything, had been stolen. Did Mrs. Grimm need a ride?

"No . . . I . . . I . . . have a car . . . I'll be over . . . as soon as I . . . can," she managed to tell the sergeant.

Tuesday was there, looking pale and distressed. He was standing in the lobby, his long, handsome face the picture of despair. On seeing Mrs. Grimm come in, he rushed over to her and impulsively grabbed each of her hands in his and squeezed them tightly.

"Oh, Judith, isn't it awful, just awful," he said, his voice almost breaking. "To think I was the last person to see her alive. Isn't it terrible?"

Dear Judith—for shame, she told herself—icy fingers, lovely icy fingers, danced up and down her spine and butterflies swam in the small lake of beer that still remained.

"Yes . . . ah . . . Anthony," it just came out, just like that, "it's awful." She almost, very nearly—it was close, too close—blurted out that it was great, wonderful, oh Tony, oh Tony, squeezing my hands, sending icy fingers up and down my spine.

Fortunately, or otherwise, a stocky greyhaired man in a light blue suit came out of the condo just then, and seeing Mrs. Grimm and rightly surmising that she was the cleaning woman (Say, there's a real buxom armful, thought he, a widower with an eye for a suitable replacement), he introduced himself and ushered Mrs. Grimm, who held on to the last possible second, into the condo.

"I'm Lieutenant Margolis," he said. "We thought that since you have been Mrs. Thornhill's . . . ah . . . have helped her with the housekeeping for so many years—we've learned this, Mrs. Grimm, from other residents here—well, perhaps you can tell us what's missing."

The place was a wreck. Drawers had been thrown to the floor, shoes, clothes, coats thrown from closets, pictures ripped from the walls. It took Mrs. Grimm—thank God the body had been taken

away, though she nearly fainted when she first saw the large red stain on the lovely carpet in the study—it took her almost forty-five minutes to determine what was missing. After all, she had shined many of the items time after time, and Mrs. Thornhill had often mentioned what each particular item had cost, not boasting, just in a matter-of-fact way.

"So, Mrs. Grimm," said the lieutenant after the dismal tour of the place was finished, "you say there are twelve silver candlesticks, George III and George II variety . . . let's see," here he checked his notes, "at least three English silver tea trays, a very expensive shell-shaped sauceboat, two George II cake baskets, a pair of George II domed tankards, a Dutch silver ram's-head handled wine cooler, three Russian trays with mounted nephrite handles fashioned by Fabergé, and, as you said, perhaps as many as a dozen odds and ends of silver . . . the whole lot probably worth in excess of fifty thousand dollars? Is that about right, Mrs. Grimm?"

"As near as I can tell, lieutenant," said poor Mrs. Grimm, feeling queasier by the minute. "Now may I please go?"

"Of course. But I do want to tell you, Mrs. Grimm, not that this will, ah, change things, but it might help to assuage your grief just a bit. Every single one of the occupants in the building whom we were able to contact, and Mr. Colinwood, especially he, all said that Mrs. Thornhill was constantly praising you to . . . ah, that is, she not only held you in the highest esteem as her . . . cleaning person but also as a person of the highest rectitude."

That broke Mrs. Grimm up. She sobbed and sobbed, gradually taking hold of herself as Lieutenant Margolis kept patting her on the shoulder and uttering soothing sounds.

"I'm all right now, lieutenant," she finally said. "I'm sorry for having . . . well, no, no, I'm okay now . . . I can drive home . . . and thanks for being so . . . kind."

"Not at all, Mrs. Grimm. It was . . . ah . . . it was nothing."

Back home, in her garage, getting out of her car, something suddenly hit her. My God, I forgot about the rubbish. She hurried down the snow-covered driveway to the curb. It was gone. Oh my, moaned Mrs. Grimm, smitten with one blow after another.

"They never pick it up before noon in winter," she wailed as she entered the house. "Still . . . just what the hell was I going to do . . . paste it all together? Maybe . . . maybe . . . oh dear God, help me . . . maybe I'll get away with it."

The sad story was featured on the evening news on the local TV

station. Apparently the intruder had entered through a back window—there were footprints in the snow—and had used a glass cutter to cut out a section of a back window and had then reached in and unlocked the window. Mrs. Thornhill had been escorted to the Fireside, a local restaurant, by a Mr. Anthony Colinwood, and she had returned home around ten o'clock and had apparently been attacked by the burglar, who, police believe, is the very same person who has been burglarizing homes in that section of town for the past six or seven months. An upstairs neighbor had heard the screams and called the police.

Mrs. Thornhill, went on the TV anchorperson in a hushed voice, was one of West Hampshire's richest persons and was renowned for her philanthropic efforts as well as for her indefatigable activities on numerous town committees. She will be sorely missed.

Poor Mrs. Grimm, one would think she was all out of tears and sobs, for how much can a body, even a hundred fifty-eight pound body (actually a hundred sixty-four pound body—as mentioned Mrs. Grimm, incorruptible to a fault, had turned the bathroom scale back years before . . . but please don't tell, the poor woman's been through enough), how much can it continue to generate before running dry? In Mrs. Grimm's case it generated more than enough to keep her sobbing and crying most of the evening.

As the weeks went by and the police did not come to the door and say, "Sorry, Mrs. Grimm, but we have it on good authority that you stole an extremely valuable unpublished manuscript from Mrs. Thornhill . . . come with us . . . and, Mrs. Grimm, Lieutenant Margolis says he is so upset that he is resigning from the force, he plans to become a monk, his faith in human nature shattered," she began to think, Maybe I did get away with it.

She did, no one's having been taken into Mrs. Thornhill's confidence and the novel still a chapter or so from The End.

It is now May, 1986, glorious springtime in New England. Early flowers—especially the pretty, perky dandelions—are abloom. Birds are atrill. Trees are abund. Bees are abuzz. Worms are awriggle. Spring cleaning is apace. Some people are actually doing windows and singing. Boy oh boy oh boy, it's great to be alive in springtime in New England.

A tall, svelte, raven-haired (died, you know, but . . .) woman in tight slacks, a loose red blouse, is happily scrubbing windows (she uses plain vinegar, has for years) on the front porch of the handsome clapboard house at 456 Chestnut Street, West Hampshire, Massachusetts.

A car turns the corner, slows, then stops about thirty feet away. "Why do you think he married her?" asks the grey-haired tweedy passenger, Agatha Harding, renowned birder.

"If you were a widower living in an eight room house with twenty-five or thirty windows, wouldn't you jump at the chance to marry someone who did windows?" replied the driver, more than a little enviously. She is ex-Monday, fallen on hard times, metaphorically speaking, her golden-haired Johnny, the apprentice plumber, gone these many months to California, his replacement a smelly, scruffy no-nonsense oldtimer nicknamed Rasputin ("If you ever send that . . . that disgusting creature to my house again, I'll, etc. . . etc. . . etc.," the poor woman).

"We're being catty," said Agatha, also in bleak tone. "Give the devil her due. She had every damned bachelor and every widower in town, and God knows how many married men, slobbering all over her after she came back from the combination fat farm, cosmetic surgery institution. I'll bet that whole deal cost at least twenty-five thousand dollars, maybe more."

"At least," agreed ex-Monday in crestfallen tone. "Still, I would have bet my last nickel that Mrs. Grimm would never stoop to doing windows. And, to think if Grace hadn't left her . . . imagine leaving your cleaning woman fifty thousand dollars . . . I can understand, oh . . . say as much as one thousand . . . but fifty thousand . . . that's . . . that's outrageous."

"Is it? Didn't she leave seventy-five thousand to beautify the town dump?" snapped Agatha, feeling older, sadder, gloomier now that spring had come and there were only she and four or five other old bitter widows to share in the burgeoning splendor. "What were you going to say about . . . you said if Grace hadn't left her . . ."

"I was going to say Mrs. Grimm would still be my cleaning woman. Of course you, Agatha, living in that retirement complex where everything is done for you, don't realize what a hideous problem it is trying to find a replacement for Judith Grimm."

"Judith Grimm Colinwood, Lillian," snapped Agatha. "My heart bleeds for you. Come on, let's go. We don't want to be late for the lecture. I can't hardly wait to hear it. Imagine, 'Freud Was a Fraud' . . . good God, can't they leave the poor man alone."

"Well, at least it'll kill part of the day," replied ex-Monday as the car pulled away from the curb and disappeared down the street, its two occupants steeped in gloom, thinking of days long gone, when each was young and springtime was wonderful.

In a moment or so the front door opens at 456 Chestnut and a

tall, slender, handsome man, his hair atousle, comes out. He crouches down, sneaks up on the singing window cleaner, and lewdly pinches one of her nifty buttocks—the unit made temptingly pinchable via forty-five hundred dollars' worth of expert suction lipectomy, to go with the eighty-five hundred dollar rhytidec-tomy—face lift—the thirty-five hundred dollar nose job, rhino-plasty, the seventy-five hundred dollar month-long reducing program.

"Tony . . ." squeals the window cleaner as she turns and swats at him with her cleaning rag, "stop that . . . stop that. What will the neighbors think? Now get back inside . . . work on your bird book."

"Okay, but it's all your fault for wearing those tight slacks and that loose blouse."

"Hee hee," giggles the enthralled Mrs. Colinwood, "I'll bet you say that to all the girls. Now go on, beat it, I have twenty more windows to do."

Grinning from ear to ear he goes back inside, the sequel to his *Birds of the Berkshires* (which was still selling well in New England) due at the publisher in a month.

As for Judith and her Regency novels, truth having become superior to fiction, she had—thank God I'm done with them—cast adrift, with no compunction whatsoever, the brooding lord of the manor, the raven-haired virginal downstairs maid, the mysterious stranger in the purple cloak seen skulking from the Boar's Head at closing time, the whole kit and caboodle. She was in paradise, the real paradise, her only worry being that the windows were so clean that poor little birds kept flying into them, the poor things.

UNSOLVED

by
W. H. Organ

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

Jacques Benoit's latest novel deals with an international effort to cope with certain lawless elements. His chief character is named Pierre, a French security agent stationed in Paris, who meets with five of his foreign counterparts (one is from Italy) to exchange information. The rendezvous takes place in Marseilles. To better conceal his movements en route to the rendezvous, each of the six agents used two different means of transportation to arrive in Marseilles. Each chose either a plane or a train and one other form of travel which differed from all the others. From the following clues, can you determine each agent's country and mode of travel for each leg of his journey?

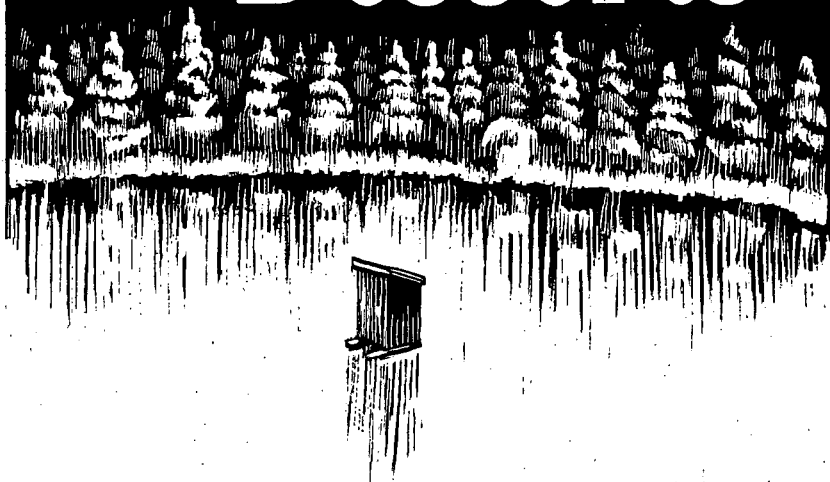
1. One of the agents used a bicycle on the second leg of his journey.
2. Donald's first leg was by plane; the Spaniard rode horseback for the first hundred miles of his journey.
3. Horace started his journey by bus.
4. The agent who started by train and finished by motorcycle was not the American.
5. The Greek agent arrived in Marseilles by train.
6. Philip was the only agent to arrive in Marseilles by plane.
7. The bicyclist, who was not Carl, traveled by train for part of his journey.
8. When the Englishman deplaned in Paris, he rented a car for the rest of his journey.
9. Raoul traveled by ship and plane, though not necessarily in that order.

See page 148 for the solution to the September puzzle.

"Rendezvous in Marseilles" by W. H. Organ, reprinted courtesy of Dell Magazines, © 1988, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

FICTION

Frozen— —Desserts



by Carol Farley

10-7-74

I see all sides of humanity here at Frozen Lake. Oh, I know most people think this little store must be lonely and boring nine months of the year, but you'd be surprised at how busy it stays even after all the

summer traffic is gone. We have our year-rounders, too, you know, people who make this place their home no matter how desolate it might seem here. There's plenty to do if you've a mind to do it after the snow

falls and the lake freezes. There's skiing and fishing and skating and snowmobiling. Of course, like most women my age I don't ski or skate, and I think snowmobiles are Satan's way of getting all of us to go straight to hell in a hurry, but I do like ice fishing.

When the lake freezes over, lots of us who live around here cart our shanties out on the ice. Leave them there till the thaw. There's better fishing in the winter than the summer people could ever dream of: perch, pike, trout—even smelt, if you want to fish at night. Sitting out there alone in a shanty with nothing but the stars overhead, why there's no better way to get your thoughts and your blood pressure settled down all nice and smooth. Light a few candles, take a few sips of hot chocolate or warm whisky, and you can be all cosy.

Lots of times when I'm sitting out there on the ice alone, I think of Willie Stroop. He died nearly twenty years ago. Froze to death. Trapped inside his shanty. Temperature fell way below zero with winds that were strong enough to bite through steel. Candles, hot chocolate, and a bottle of whisky can't do much then.

'Course, with Willie Stroop, a barrel of whisky would be more like it. Over the years

that man must have guzzled enough whisky to float a battleship. And the more he drank, the meaner he got. I used to feel sorry for Sue Ann, his wife, and Bonnie, their little girl, because usually he took his meanness out on them. Bruises, black eyes, even a broken arm—that's what Sue Ann put up with. And God only knows what else there was that we couldn't see. This was long before the days when they talked about battered wives and abused children the way they do on TV today. There wasn't much help at all back then. People had to turn the other way when a man went on a rampage years ago.

Sue Ann never complained, though, no, not once. She told folks she fell and broke that arm, and because that's what everybody wanted to believe, that's what they said they believed. Oh yes, there's nothing as easily fooled as the human mind being persuaded in the direction it wants to go.

Bonnie suffered, too, as she got older. That devil beat his child when he was drunk. Which got to be most of the time because at the end there he didn't have any kind of steady work. Called himself a tree-cutter, but he didn't work unless it suited him. Lazy, that's what he was. We could have smothered in trees for all he ever cut

down. His family downstate left him a little money, so he had a bit of an income. Spent most of it on booze, I think.

It got so I wouldn't sell him any. I could have used the money, Lord knows, and my profit on whisky is nothing to sneeze at. But I have my standards, too, and I got to feeling responsible every time I saw Sue Ann come in with her face all bundled and hidden with another big scarf. I pretty well knew she was hiding a black eye or a split lip.

Mostly she sent Bonnie when they needed a loaf of bread or a dozen eggs or something small like that. Everybody does their big shopping in Windler, ten miles north of the lake, and that's fine with me. I can't sell at those discount prices. You've got to pay more for convenient things.

But I hated charging anything at all with that child. She was a slip of a girl, with eyes so big you knew that she'd seen more than a child her age ought to see. She was small and skinny, and she sort of huddled into herself, as though she wanted to disappear right into her own arms, like maybe that was really the only refuge she had. I took a real liking to her, and she seemed to know it because she'd stand in the store and talk to me when she was

too shy to say boo to anybody else. She didn't have many friends, you see.

But there was no point in not charging Bonnie full price for the groceries. I knew Willie Stroop would get any change she happened to bring back from my store. He was buying his whisky in Windler by then, and others told me he called me "the old bat." I knew he'd relish getting money away from the old bat so he could run to Windler and use it for whisky.

So I always gave Bonnie special treats just for herself. I'd hand her a bag of candy or a big chocolate bar. Maybe ice cream or a popsicle. I suspected she didn't get many treats at home, because she always perked right up when she had a little something extra, and I noticed she started eating it the minute she got out the door, too. She had to walk two miles to their shack down the road, so I figured she was done by the time she got home.

She was about seven when I first realized that Willie was abusing her, too. The signs weren't so noticeable to most people, but I see more than the average person sees. Don't know whether that's a curse or a blessing. People come in and out of this store all day every day, and in thirty seconds flat I can tell you whether someone

is happy or miserable, sick or well, scared or secure. Like some kind of science fiction thermometer, I can take the temperature of human emotions. And I saw that summer that Bonnie Stroop was scared.

She seemed to cringe whenever a man walked into the store. Hugging herself tighter, she would slowly back towards the door, her eyes big and unblinking. She wore longsleeved sweatshirts often that summer, too, when the heat hung around as oppressive as house guests during a week-long rain spell.

Doc Springer came in one day just as she was leaving. "I'll bet my bottom dollar that child has black and blue marks all up and down her arms," I told him.

"You won't get me betting against you." He watched her thin figure disappear down the road. "Willie Stroop doesn't feel like a man unless he's hurting or killing. They think he's the one who shot the black bear cubs they found last month."

"Animals are one thing," I said. "But a child? There ought to be something somebody can do."

"Nobody can do a thing legally unless there's a signed complaint, Edna. Sue Ann hasn't ever officially complained."

"Scared to, that's all. You ever had her in your office?"

He shook his head. "Not likely I will, either. Willie says he takes his wife and daughter to Windler if they need a doctor. Says they know more about medicine there."

I had to snort at that. "And less about him," I said. Usually I'm not a vengeful kind of woman. Live and let live, I always say. I don't like thinking about a man beating his wife, but if she doesn't complain, then that's her business. But when there's a child involved, why then the picture changes. Then I think it's everybody's business. "He ought to be tarred and feathered," I added to Doc that day. "He ought to be jailed."

"Well, he won't be. Unless he does some real damage, he won't be in any trouble at all. He makes real sure that there aren't any marks on that little girl, and his wife puts up with whatever he puts out. There's nothing we can do, Edna. Nothing at all."

And so time passed. As she grew older, Bonnie was sweeter and prettier, but she seemed even more quiet. Mostly she'd tell me about the books she read when she came into the store. I pitied the poor little thing, but Doc was right. There was nothing anybody could do. There was never any outward sign that Willie Stroop was abusing the child.

Then about twenty years ago, it happened. That winter was one of the coldest on record. Just look it up if you don't believe me. Temperatures fell so far that mercury bounced on the ice. The winds howled and the snowdrifts grew taller. Funny thing, though, the sun was unusually clear and bright. Just seemed to have lost its power to heat as it traveled across the winter sky. The fishing that winter was the best it had ever been, too. Lots of days I'd close up the store and go sit in my shanty and start pulling in one fish right after the other. My freezer was loaded, but I still went back for more. I sold some and gave some away. And I threw lots back in. It wasn't the fish that kept me going back out on the ice like that—it was all the things that go along with fishing in winter. I kept my shanty door open and let it all sink into me: the rainbow beauty of moisture suspended in freezing air; the sight of crystal diamonds littering the snow; the peace; the quiet.

Of course others had their shanties all around, too, but we never bothered each other. That's an unwritten law here at Frozen Lake. You don't traipse around from shanty to shanty, asking nosy questions. A man's home may be his castle, but his shanty is his whole

world. Out on the ice you tend to your own business.

Willie Stroop's shanty was not far from mine. In fact, I might have wanted to murder the man ordinarily, but I plain ignored him on the ice. Besides, he fairly well kept inside his shanty. It was the biggest one on Frozen Lake, and Willie put it in the exact same spot every year. I always left mine in one place, too. Fish bite best just a few yards off the big dropoff.

Not that Willie cared how the fish were biting. He carried his case of beer and bottles of whisky in every day and he'd sit there drinking until the sun set. Sue Ann or Bonnie would have to come down and help him back to shore. They'd try not to look my way when they went past, and I pretended I didn't see them. No sense in making a person wallow in embarrassment because someone else has acted like a fool. I used to wonder if Willie ever even put bait on his hooks.

There wasn't any way to tell because usually Willie had his door closed tight. Oh, I suppose that wasn't anything to marvel over. I mean, lots of us closed the door when the wind was bad. But Willie never opened his. The only way you knew he was inside was because his padlock was off the lock. He had the biggest padlock I'd ever

seen on a shanty. Guess he felt he had to protect his creation. He'd built the place himself out of heavy wood and steel. Most of us had light shanties that could be moved by just one or two people. Kids sometimes got wild and went out and knocked over every shanty on the ice, in fact. But Willie's shanty was immovable. When it froze to the ice a whole herd of elephants probably couldn't have moved it. That was just the way Willie wanted it. People were quick to repeat what he announced in every bar in town. Nobody, he said, could push him or his shanty around.

But it was perfectly all right, of course, for him to continue pushing his wife and daughter around.

Must have been near the end of January that year when Doc Springer brought me the bad news.

"Looks like Willie's really done it this time," he told me. "Bonnie's deaf."

"Deaf?" I remember I'd been putting ice cream bars in the store freezer at the time. Funny how people like ice cream in the coldest months. I'd just ordered a freezer full. The minute Doc spoke, though, I realized that Bonnie hadn't been in for a long time. Ice cream is her favorite treat, so I always liked to give her some. "But she's only ten

years old," I cried. "What happened?"

He heaved a sigh powerful enough to rattle the pages on the newspapers in front of him. "Just talked to Jake Hagerman—the doctor over in Windler. Seems as though Bonnie had both ears infected for weeks. By the time Willie and Sue Ann brought her in yesterday, she was stone deaf."

I stood there too horrified to speak. But the horror wasn't over.

"The thing is," Doc went on, "eardrums can burst because of untreated infection, or they can burst because of a few well-placed blows to the head."

I sagged against the freezer. "And you think—"

Frowning, he straightened his shoulders. "Doesn't matter what I think. Doesn't matter what Jake Hagerman thinks either. He says the child was full of black and blue marks, but both her folks say she fell down the steps when she was sick at home. She told him that, too."

"My God!" I cried. "My God! That shack they live in doesn't even have stairs."

"I know that. And you know that. But it looks as though nobody can do anything unless Sue Ann or Bonnie is willing to say what really goes on at home. Sue Ann's so scared of Willie

that she's got the child terrified, too. Don't know which one to feel sorrier for."

"And Bonnie? Will she be deaf forever?"

"Jake got them an appointment in Lansing for next week. There's a good ear man down there. Might be able to do something. In the meantime, Bonnie will stay deaf."

I felt so sick I couldn't stay in the store. The walls seemed to cave right in on me as I thought of poor Bonnie Stroop in her cold, silent world.

An hour later I trudged down to the lake. Close to zero degrees it was by then, and getting colder. My fishing shanty shone all silver in the distance. Through the haze of my breath I saw that the ice was nearly deserted. That suited me just fine.

Willie was in his shanty, though, because I saw the padlock hanging open on the latch. His door was shut but I heard him singing some drunken song inside. Yes, he could sing while his family suffered. Suffered because . . . I couldn't finish the thought. Suddenly I was so full of rage I wanted to yank open that heavy door and send my fishing spear straight through his heart.

But the moment passed, sanity returned. Somehow, sometime, Willie Stroop would get

what he deserved, I told myself, and I moved along until I reached my own place. Had to close the door that day because the wind was so fierce.

It was about an hour later when I heard snowmobiles zooming across the ice. How I hate those wretched machines! Smelling up the clear air, scaring wild animals literally to death, blasting noise that shakes the ground! I sat seething while they roared around. The high school closes when the weather's bad; then the toughies all come out to play. They whooped and shouted, and I wondered what mischief they were up to, but I stayed right inside my shanty. No business of mine, I told myself.

But the racket spoiled my mood for fishing. Besides, the wind had started blowing and the temperature had dropped some more. Finally, when the ice was quiet again, I threw back the three fish I had and I started for home.

Sheriff Lenski asked me later if I noticed Willie's shanty when I passed it then. It was a blank in my mind and that's all there was to it. Made me feel like a fool to admit it to him, though, like as though I was a zombie marching through life. I told the sheriff that I couldn't remember seeing Willie's shanty at all, and he said not to worry.

Seems as though lots of people just plain don't notice what's going on around them when they've got a lot on their mind. Like you can be driving to work and find yourself there without ever remembering turning off the highway.

Willie's shanty may have been padlocked already when I passed, or maybe not. Sheriff Lenski never located those snowmobilers to ask them any questions. By the time he thought to break the lock and force his way into the shanty late the next afternoon, new snow had covered whatever footprints there might have been. The coroner finally called Willie's death a tragic accident.

"Seems as though you would have heard Willie shout or beat on the door if it'd been locked as you passed," Sheriff Lenski told me. "Willie may have passed out for a while with all the alcohol he had in him, but he came to at some time or another long enough to nearly tear that place apart on the inside. That shanty was so well put together and frozen so tight to the ice that he couldn't claw his way out, though. If we'd have gotten to him sooner, we might have saved him. But who could have guessed that he was locked inside?"

Nobody could have guessed, and that's the weird thing about

this whole story, because Willie, himself, had destroyed his own chances of rescue. You see, Sue Ann sent Bonnie down to get Willie around six o'clock, when he hadn't shown up for the dinner. Bonnie told her mom she got all the way to the shanty and saw that it was padlocked. Why would she ever guess that Willie was still inside? If he'd been yelling and beating on the door like crazy right about then, she couldn't have heard him, could she?

And whose fault was it that she couldn't hear?

That's the question Doc asked me a few days later. Then he added, "It's a bad way to die, but it seems right somehow, doesn't it? What goes around, comes around."

I nodded and kept my peace. I didn't tell him what had happened that morning when everybody was still out looking for Willie. Just before noon Sue Ann had come in with Bonnie, asking if I'd seen him.

"We think maybe he went to Windler and stayed there overnight after he closed up his shanty," Sue Ann said in that hushed, quiet way of hers. "He didn't come home last night. We don't know for sure where he went."

I wondered why in the world she cared where the devil was, but I didn't say that. I made a

bit of small talk and then I turned to Bonnie. "How are you feeling?" I asked, but the child was looking at a magazine and didn't turn.

Sue Ann looked down at her worn gloves. I could see the shame just radiate out from her skinny body. "She can't hear anything," she told me, and then she flushed and cleared her throat. "Well, I guess I'll ask around in a few more places." She leaned over and touched Bonnie's arm. "Come on," she told her, gesturing toward the door.

Bonnie hated to leave, I could see that. The door had already closed behind Sue Ann before she put the magazine down and turned to go. She already had her hand on the latch when I suddenly remembered the treats. Like a dummy, I forgot she couldn't hear, and I called to the back of her head. "I have ice cream bars, honey. Want one?"

She stopped in her tracks,

then whirled around. "Ice cream? Okay!"

I kept a sensible silence a week later, too, when Doc said that the Lansing man had found that Bonnie's ear problems had almost entirely cleared up. "Sue Ann found a job down there, so they'll be moving," he went on. "Guess those two are going to have a fine new life."

"I'm glad," I said. And I was. About a lot of things. There are those of us who can't see and those of us who can't hear because, like Sheriff Lenski says, we have a lot on our minds. But sometimes two people together can see—or not see—and hear—or not hear—exactly enough to make the world a more pleasant place to live. Bonnie Stoop and I know that for sure.

Stop and see me again when you're up here at Frozen Lake. Like I said, I see a lot of strange things happen around here, and I've got plenty of time to tell you about them.

FICTION

At Death's Door

by Perry Brass



Illustration by Christine Juett

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In New York, it is not uncommon to meet a great range of people. It is a city of social mobility, and you can easily find yourself swimming outside your usual level of social acquaintance. A lot of people drown that way.

"The *chica* on the fourteenth floor—in the big duplex—there's something *mucho* crazy about her," my friend Watson, the delivery boy from our local Gristede's was telling me. Watson Rosado, pure New Yoricán, was from the South Bronx, but had been born in Puerto Rico when his parents were on vacation back home. They decided to give him an Anglo name, and the first one that came to mind was when they were watching a Sherlock Holmes movie with Basil Rathbone dubbed in Spanish. "Qué pasa, Watson?"

I decided that if I wanted to know everything going on in my building, someone like Watson was a person to know. He was glib and friendly, and he didn't treat me like a rich white person, because I wasn't. My wife Hillary was, but I wasn't. She was in Yugoslavia looking over one of her real estate deals—her father owns a string of hotels around the world and the Dalmatian Coast supposedly was going to be hot one of these days—while I babysat with our two Siamese cats and a Persian (the turf wars around Hillary's

Ming vases and bibelots of Baccarat crystal could cause heart failure), collected her mail, and made myself comfortable.

I have never considered myself a kept husband—I do have a trade: I'm a screenwriter and I produce small, *very* small movies. But without the fortunate marriage I made, I'd probably be living in a one-room apartment on Waverly Place in Greenwich Village, instead of in this nice layout near the Whitney Museum.

Watson caught on very quickly to this. "She got the bread, right?" He smiled and drank some of the Kirin beer I offered him. "You sure this is from Japan? I didn't know beer grew in Japan." I smiled back. Yes, it was true. The beer was from Japan. My wife was wealthy. "You done good for yourself," Watson said.

I thanked him for the compliment.

"That's right," he said. "Live off women. I used to have a girlfriend. Named Minnie. Cute! But broke, broke, broke. All she says is buy me this, buy that. We don't last. My next girl's gonna be rich, like you."

I told him I wasn't the rich one; then asked him about the *chica* upstairs.

"She strange, man. Her name is Mrs. Lancer. She's about a hundred years younger than her old man. Now, I been bring-

Another whole woman? I tried to remember who she was. I remembered seeing a very attractive, snotty-looking younger woman with an unattractive snottier-looking older man once in the lobby. They were waiting for a cab. She went out of her way not to look at me. I was waiting for Hillary to come down. We were going to a patron's opening at the Metropolitan Museum, one of those dress-like-they're-going-to-outlaw-fashion-tomorrow gigs, and I got tired of watching Hillary primp and worry. She'd gained five pounds and she was taking it out on me. Okay, so I like to eat and she has the money to support my restaurant habit.

She was a looker in that kind of wonderful, *Mademoiselle*

I was curious and I wanted to ask the doorman about them. But I knew better. The building, like most of these palaces of the rich and absent, was a fortress of discretion. The staff of doormen had been there since the Year One, and you couldn't get any information out of them with a crowbar. I tried to pry out some juicy gossip once about a couple next to me—I'd heard them fighting when I got out of the elevator—but O'Shaunessey, the head doorman, who was an even bigger snob than Hillary's old man, only said, "In this house you learn to open a door and close your mouth." I took this to mean that the Henrys—my neighbors—would kill him, or at least stiff him at Christmas, if he let any cats out of any bags. So much for the staff.

"Man, she just about put the

moves on me. She's scared, too. I can tell. There's something about this *chica* that is scared. Like I know scared. You grow up in the South Bronx and you can smell scared on the next block."

Interesting, I thought. Suddenly the young Mrs. Lancer is scared, here on Park Avenue. Being scared on Park Avenue has a different quality from being scared, say, on Avenue C. People are scared on Park Avenue for two reasons: they're going to lose all their money.

Or they're going to lose their lives.

I took a ten dollar bill from my wallet. "Watson, I want you to watch over Mrs. Lancer. Tell me if anything unusual happens up there."

He gave me the ten back. "You don't got to pay me, Mr. Wingo." I asked him to call me Bill. "We're friends," he said. "Thanks a lot for the Japanese beer. It was good. But what's your interest in this, man?"

I looked over at Tuptim, the older—and meaner—of the two Siamese. "Curiosity," I said. "Just curiosity."

The next few days we hit one of those devastating meltdowns you can get in New York in spring, or late April to be exact. It was all heat and no air conditioning. You're sure your sinuses are

going to go on Red Alert. Close down all passages. The pollen count was in the zillions. The Persian was driving me nuts. I thought seriously of killing him, or sending all three cats out to be boarded. I was gulping sinus pills like mad. All they did was make my head pound. Finally I decided just to hit a bourbon bottle. But good. Three full shots later, my sinuses felt great. Not cleared particularly, but fine. I expected Hillary to call that evening, possibly at midnight. God knows what time that was in Yugoslavia. She'd got in several more checks from her stocks. Nice fat checks. I couldn't sign them—part of our extensive marriage agreement was that she'd kept her name, her stocks, her car, and a separate checking account. Modern women. Well, since I came from dirt poor stock in California, I wouldn't—and couldn't—argue. Also, she had two overdue library books from the private business library in Midtown she belonged to.

I was going to get her on the library books. We'd laugh about that—at about six dollars a minute.

I decided to go out. From our bedroom window you can see the tops of trees in the park. You have to turn your head at a very difficult angle, and you only get a sliver of view. But I knew that spring had sprung on

the city—another hard, hot spring. I put on my designer jeans and my fake Gucci loafers that I wore just for spite, a silk polo shirt (okay, you got it, flaunt it) and a buttery suede jacket Hillary gave me for my last birthday. It came from one of those small shops on Madison Avenue where you don't see prices and the help ignores you. It was a deep grape color. It said *expensive*. I felt very confident in it. Hillary, I always told her, had taste.

I got the elevator, and there in it was Mrs. Lancer. I knew it had to be her. It couldn't have been anyone else. Although she was impeccably dressed in an updated Chanel suit, black with gray dots, there were just a couple of *peccs* out of her impeccable appearance. Her blouse was not quite tucked in. Her black and white patent leather pumps were badly scuffed, and her handbag was open. Unzipped.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"I'm sorry?" She suddenly smiled at me, then tucked the smile right back in.

I asked her again if something was wrong. I noticed that she was wearing dark glasses as the sun was going down. This was usually a tip-off on Park Avenue that the rain had wrecked the rhubarb: it's okay for West Coast drug smugglers, but not in our crowd. "Are you all right, Mrs. Lancer?"

The elevator door opened at the lobby. The three doormen usually on staff were down. They looked at her quickly, without saying a word. O'Shaunessey gave me his most don't-even-ask look, and told her her cab was waiting. He blocked my way in front. I thought of decking him right then, but Hillary would never have stood for it. A husband you can always get. A Park Avenue apartment that she bought for two million dollars under market... in other words, don't mess up at your own door.

I had to stand and face O'Shaunessey, all two hundred suety pounds of him, and look bored while she got into the cab. I saw her get in. There was a man already in the cab. Lancer? I couldn't see. But he was older, and looked hot and uncomfortable.

I went out. It was muggy, and still only April. Maybe some Arctic air would rescue us yet. I got tired of looking at young, gorgeous people jogging in practically nothing. Now that I'm married and footloose and fancily fettered, girls are only an off-limits temptation. Hillary would find out. I'm sure the cats would tell her.

I had a terribly overpriced hamburger at a yuppy hangout on Madison, then went home. I had a lot of work to do and was thinking of anything to get

out of doing it. It was ten o'clock—I noticed the time on the Napoleon clock over the mantel—when the phone rang. At first I thought it was Hillary, but I couldn't hear the usual static and satellite waves you hear calling through Dubrovnik.

"Bill?"

"Yes."

There was a long pause, then: "Can you come up here? Don't let anybody see you."

I had no idea who was talking. "Up where?"

"This is. . ."

Suddenly a Spanish sounding voice. "It's gonna be okay. Okay, I tell you."

Young woman's voice: "No, no, no."

Watson's voice: "Bill, you come up to the Lancers' apartment, okay? Don't let anybody see you. Take the stairs."

I told them all right. I felt like a fool suddenly as I locked my door and eyeballed the hallway. There were three apartments on our floor. The Lancers' apartment was five flights up, in a duplex that took up almost the entire floor. I'd seen a complete layout of the building. Hillary kept one. "In case of fire," she explained. "You have to know what every floor looks like."

I think it's easier sneaking into another building than sneaking up five flights of your own. How could I explain it if

O'Shaunessey or one of his obsequious underlings was nosing about? They already considered me a classless interloper, two steps away from a gigolo. What could I do—tell them I was having an affair with Mrs. Lancer? She was young enough to be my younger, younger sister. And obviously she liked older men.

Luckily no one was there. I got out of the stairway, out of breath, and knocked softly on her door. It opened. I walked into a darkened apartment. There was Watson, dressed only in his jeans, without a shirt or shoes.

"I guess it's hot here," I said.

He nodded his head. He took me to her, through a long entrance hall into the living room. There were almost no lights on where she sat on a couch. She was wearing a light Japanese silk robe. "Be careful," Watson said. "She's very busted up."

She was crying. I could hear it. I left Watson and approached her softly. From the huge windows I could see the lights of New York and a great view of the park. "Mrs. Lancer?" I whispered.

"They're going to kill me," she cried. "They're going to kill me."

"Who, Mrs. Lancer? Who?" I looked around. The place was almost empty. For a Park Avenue apartment, the joint looked almost cleaned out, like the

moving men had come already. There was that one couch under the window where she was sitting, and a few very undistinguished looking chairs. I wondered why Watson hadn't noticed this. "What's going on?" I said to her. "What's going on, Mrs. Lancer?"

Suddenly she screamed. She tore at her hair. It came off. A black wig. Under it, her hair was a dirty blonde, sort of frizzy, not the perfectly kept and clipped, finishing school hair I remembered. "I'm Denise Wilson. Not Mrs. Lancer. Mrs. Lancer's dead and I know it. They're going to kill me."

At that moment, Watson drew me aside. "Oh, boy, Bill. We got into some sticky stuff here. Let me tell you what happened. She's been babbling and screaming and crying for about an hour now. You see, I come up here and bring the groceries. I come up every three days with her order from Gristede's."

I watched her out of the side of my left eye, but listened to Watson with both ears. It seemed that for the last several years, Tina Lancer had had a certain standing order with Gristede's. This was natural with many Park Avenue families. The maid or the cook put in an order at one time, and the order changed very little. The butcher could almost fill it in his sleep. In fact, one sure way

everyone in the neighborhood *would* find out if something happened to a particular family was if the family's regular order at Gristede's changed radically.

The Lancer order was basically pork on Monday, veal on Tuesday. Then chicken; then fish. There was room for a few blank days when they ate out. The order was split up every couple of days, and Watson would deliver it, and Tina would sign for it.

Then Watson started to notice that Mrs. Lancer was starting to act differently. And he had noticed that furniture was disappearing from the apartment. First a desk. Then an antique vase. In the beginning he thought things were just being sent out to be cleaned. "These rich people always cleaning things, you know." Then he started to wonder why the things weren't coming back. The Lancers had great things. "It was all antiques stuff here," he said. "But that's Park Avenue, right? Only the best."

He also told me that Mrs. Lancer was starting to act strange physically. Bumping into things. Shaking.

That evening, she had been friendlier than usual. She offered him something to drink. She was shaking terribly. His whole heart went out to her. They ended up in the bedroom.

She did make all the moves on him, and he responded. It wasn't difficult. He didn't even realize she was wearing someone else's hair. He wasn't that interested in her hair, frankly.

Afterwards, she started crying. Screaming. He told her not to worry. He'd never mention a word to anyone. Scout's honor. All that.

He couldn't understand her radical change in behavior, from ice cold Park Avenue bitch to—well, what happened in the bedroom. Then she started talking about someone killing her. *He* got scared. That's when he told her she should call me. "I got a friend in the building who's been interested in you."

I went into the kitchen and found something that looked like coffee. The refrigerator was full of food, but nothing looked as if cooking had gone on recently. The cupboards were empty. I boiled some water in a pot, threw some coffee into it, and strained it through two layers of paper towels directly into the cups.

"Thank you," she said to me.

"Feeling better?" I asked. I sipped some of the coffee. It was bitter, but fairly acceptable. It reminded me of coffee from my student days, when I lived with a hot plate.

"I just know I've got to talk to somebody!" she said. Then she began her story. ~~She broke~~

down in several places. It was a sad story. I felt as if I'd heard the beginning several times. Maybe it was even mine.

She grew up in a small town in Ohio, where she fell in love with high school theater. She'd been the star of every play. She went on to get a degree in drama at a local college. She wanted to go further, so she applied to a famous acting school in New York down in the Village, one of those places where the alumni list reads like a roster for the Academy Awards or the Tonys. She took a bus in for the interview audition. She did three monologues—one Shakespeare, one O'Neill, one contemporary. She was told they'd let her know. She felt depressed all the way back on the bus. The competition was stiff. She was up against young women much more attractive than she, girls who'd already been on the New York stage, who'd trained in London or on the West Coast.

She got home and three weeks later she was called by the school's registrar. Not only had she been accepted, but she'd been given a full scholarship to study for a year.

She was delighted. She was elated. She was walking on air. A month later, she was walking New York pavements looking for a job and a place to live. The job wasn't hard. New York has lots of actors and lots of people

who want to hire them. She got a waitressing job her second day out, but finding a place to live was another story. Her money was running out; she'd had no idea how difficult it is to find an apartment, even a bedroom in New York.

She followed every lead she could in the papers. She saw many places that looked like rat traps, that would have qualified for slum clearance back home. At rents she couldn't believe. Then she saw an ad in the *Times* about subleasing an apartment. It gave no address, just a telephone number. The ad said, "Perfect place for the right person."

"I called the number and a man answered. He asked me my age and what I did. As soon as I told him I was twenty-three and studying acting, he said to come right over. Well, as soon as I saw the place, Bill, I knew something was funny. If I'd even known it was in this neighborhood, I never would have tried. Sublease! This place had doormen. Chandeliers in the lobby. I knew something was wrong. And I decided I wasn't going to sleep with this guy—or anyone—just to find a place to stay. I'd go back to Ohio first."

I asked her what happened. She told me that the doorman O'Shaunessey let her up and she met Mr. Lancer.

"He was old enough to be my father. I told him I couldn't possibly afford to sublease a place like this—it was beautiful then, nicely furnished. Antiques and all."

"Yeah," Watson said. "You should have seen this place. It looked like a museum. Even for Park Avenue, it was ritzy."

"Paintings and all that?" I asked.

"Oils," he answered. "Just like in the Metropolitan Museum. You know I been there many times."

I believed him. Watson was a good guy and I was glad he'd taken an interest in Denise, as easy as it was to do. I asked Denise what Lancer had told her about the apartment.

"It seemed that his wife was away in a sanitarium in Europe."

I took this in for a moment, then said, "He wanted you to pose as his wife, right?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Bill's a very smart *honcho*," Watson said smiling. "Brains all over, didn't I tell you?"

I smiled at Watson. Suddenly I put the whole thing into place, or at least a lot of it. "He told you, Denise, that the apartment was his wife's, right? And if she wasn't staying there, he didn't have the right to keep it, right?"

She nodded her head.

"You believed that?"

"I was desperate, Bill. All he told me I had to do was pass as his wife. He wouldn't even live here. He would live downtown. I still don't know where he lives. I was about her age. He asked me to sign a sublease agreement that said I could stay in the apartment under his wife's name. He told me it was a legal document."

"And you believed that, too?"

She nodded her head, and looked like she would cry again.

"Denise, that made you an accessory. It said you understood you were posing as Tina Lancer."

She did start to cry again. I told her it was all right. Worse crimes had been committed, many of them here on Park Avenue—and I was positive Richard Lancer had committed some of them. "What else did he tell you?" I asked.

She tried to compose herself. "His wife's family had been friends of his for years. Tina was a pretty wild girl—drink, drugs, partying. He told me the whole story. He was an antiques dealer—paintings, stuff like that—and he watched Tina growing up. He became like a father to her because her parents were always out of town. Finally they were both killed in a plane accident in Europe. Crashed in the Alps. It was terrible. They were on the way to

see Tina, who usually vacationed in Switzerland. As soon as Richard—Lancer—heard, he came over and she was all by herself, so she married him."

That sounded like quite a mistake, I told her. "What makes you think she's dead?"

"It just dawned on me. Why were all her clothes here, even her hairbrushes? If she had gone away for a long time, she would have taken more things with her. And her mail, personal mail, everything was here. I mean, this has been going on for six months. Finally, he started coming in and giving me these injections."

I gave her a "He what?" look.

"He said they were for my nerves. He was right. This whole thing started out really fine. Clothes. A place to stay. I could quit my waitressing job. Then it started to haunt me. What was going on? I fell apart. I dropped out of school. Bill, this has been a nightmare. He comes in every day and gives me these shots. We go out. I have to pass as Tina at restaurants, at the theater. I don't know what's going on. I know that he's killed her. I just *know* it."

"Suppose she don't take the shots?" Watson said.

That was a good idea, I agreed.

"He makes me," she answered.

"We're going to force his

hand," I told her. "Or their hands."

"I think somebody else is involved with this, too," Watson said. "This old man, he sold everything in the house. Something tells me there's another dirty fish here."

"I'm so happy you're here," Denise said to Watson. She kissed him. "I never thought I'd fall for somebody like you."

He held her. "You're gonna be all right, baby," he said.

I looked at my watch. Hillary was supposed to call soon. I told Denise not to take another injection. Lie. Scream. Do whatever. But not another one. And I told her to call me as soon as Lancer left. Every day. My number was listed—under Hillary's name. "Don't write it down. Don't leave anything around to show we've been here. Watson, make sure the door-men downstairs don't know you've been here."

"No problem. I go through the service entrance. The man down there is cool."

How wise, I thought. The service entrance.

I got downstairs unnoticed, just in time for Hillary's call.

"Bill, thank God you're home, darling."

Of course, I told her. Where else would I be?

"I've contracted the worst cold

here. The Dalmatian Coast is just wrapped in cold and fog."

I told her to keep her furs on. If I could just keep her away for a week. I didn't want Hillary or the police involved in this. At least as long as I was. I didn't think Hillary's old man, Aranopolis, Mr. Money himself, would like the idea of his son-in-law's getting mucked up with some very dirty business. Right there on Park Avenue.

I lied. I told her the weather was awful. Rain. Cold. She might as well stay in Dubrovnik and get all her work done, piling up more and more bread for Daddy's hotels.

"Are you getting a lot of work done, darling?"

"Tons." I looked over at my typewriter. It had cobwebs on it.

"You're such a sweetheart," she said. She meant it. It was wonderful having a rich wife who appreciated you, mostly for staying out of her way. I've learned the secret of marriage is to stay out of each other's way. "But I feel so terrible leaving you all alone," she said.

"That's all right," I consoled her. "As long as you're okay."

I could feel her cheering up, even through the funny scrambled satellite waves transmitting the conversation. "I feel much better now," she said. "I feel like I've just been taken

from death's door."

Don't we all? I thought.

I knew that something was going to happen when Denise stopped allowing Lancer to shoot her up with tranquilizers. If those were tranquilizers. Something silent, ugly, and mean was going on here in this very building. The question was how long would it take to find out what.

She called the next evening at seven. Lancer had become furious when she refused to take the injection. "He slapped me. He would have hurt me more, but he knows if I'm bruised, it'll look funny. He said, 'Next time, Denise, I'm going to knock you out completely. You're way too anxious, dear.' That's how he talks to me. Everything's always for my own good. What should I do, Bill?"

I told her exactly what to do, and what I was going to do, and then I began to do it.

I called my doctor the next morning and told him my allergies were killing me, that I needed some allergy injections he prescribed for me years ago. Since he was too busy to see me—and I could take my own injections—I told him he could phone the prescription in to my pharmacy. The woman who managed the place knew me and my allergy problems. I went

in and picked up the prescription. I asked her for a spare hypodermic, and she told me it was no problem.

I left a message for Watson at Gristede's. He came up to my apartment at noon and delivered a six pack of Kirin, some Lean Cuisine frozen dinners, and three packages of Pepperidge Farms cookies. Survival food when your wife's away. I gave him the hypo, filled with my allergy prescription. "This shouldn't hurt her," I said. It was mostly iron tonic anyway.

"Bill, I didn't know you had works," Watson said.

"Works?"

"Yeah." He gestured shooting heroin into his arm.

I told him to get the hell out of here. Works? Was he crazy? I told him to deliver the hypo in a Gristede's bag to Denise in two hours. I carefully opened a small box of the frozen food and placed the hypo in it, next to the plastic pouch of Veal Marengo. There was room for the hypo. I resealed the box, and handed it to Watson.

"Gotcha," he said and left.

I called Denise's number. Lancer was there.

"This is Gristede's," I said, pinching my nose. "May we speak to Mrs. Lancer about her regular order."

"Mrs. Lancer is not well right now," Lancer said in a voice that could chill antifreeze. Oh,

I thought, this is really going to screw things up. I persisted, even more nasally. "I'm sorry, sir. We can only speak with the party that placed the order. Store policy." He put her on. "It's some dope from Gristede's," he said, handing her the phone.

"Sorry, Mrs. Lancer," nasal voice. Then I went on: "Denise, this is Bill. Is he in front of you? Good, that means he can't listen in on an extension. In two hours Watson is going to come up with an order. There's a package of Veal Marengo Lean Cuisine in it. Don't put it in the freezer. It has a hypo in it. It's safe."

She started to play a scene on the phone. She told Gristede's how to handle her order, while I told her she would have to swap my hypo for Lancer's. She could turn over a drink, drop a cigarette. It was up to her. She would have to pretend then to be almost completely knocked out by the hypo. I wanted Watson to stay in her apartment. With luck, Lancer would be out when Watson delivered the hypo. But if he wasn't—well, we'd have to work on that, too.

Last, I said, "Remember, this guy Lancer is dangerous. He's killed once; he'll kill again."

I began to see a scenario happening. She'd been making trouble, so the best time to get rid of her would be now. He would drug the life out of her

and then try to get her out of the building, past the building staff. The bad thing about Park Avenue is that the same people who protect you from the mean outside world of the poor and the not-so-fabulously-wealthy also know your every move. But he could take her downstairs and just tell O'Shaunessey that his young wife was definitely under the weather.

I would need a walkie-talkie setup and access to a cab. I called Myron, a friend who lived downtown, who'd worked on one of my movies. He was a good production man and kept a Rolodex that could kill by itself. Whenever I needed anything I could call Myron. The walkie-talkie was easy for him, the cab a little harder. But everybody in New York wants to get into the movies, even if only vicariously. He told me he'd call one of his actor-cabbie friends. It worked. Myron came over in an hour with the radio and the cab. He looked very pleased with himself. He told me where the cab was parked, gave me the keys, and presented me a bill. New York is so efficient.

When Watson came by, I gave him the radio, showed him how to use it, and explained that he was going to have to get into one of the hall closets of the Lancers' duplex and stay there. If they left, he was to use the

radio and let me know.

As I suspected, Lancer *was* up to no good. He was in the apartment when Watson took the Gristede's delivery to Denise. Since Watson had his radio on, I heard everything.

"Why doesn't he use the back service entrance?" Lancer asked.

"Because we don't have any servants," Denise said angrily.

He told her to be quiet. Watson gave her the groceries. He also pointed out the Lean Cuisine package, which I thought was kind of tacky, but it's hard to get good help nowadays and it went past Lancer.

"Thank you," Denise said. "I don't usually ask for it in my orders, but I'm eating less now."

"You need help putting the order up?" Watson asked.

"No, she doesn't," Lancer snapped. "This is real impertinence. Just show him to the door, dear. I'll put the groceries in the kitchen."

Bingo! I heard footsteps. A door close. Then another door close. "I'm in the closet," Watson said. "Stay there," I told him.

I could only hope that things would work out as I'd planned. But as in making movies—when it rains for three straight days in the Sinai desert and you keep two thousand extras waiting

—you never can tell about these things.

All I knew was that the time was going very slowly and I hoped that Watson didn't have to pee. Finally, at five thirty, when people were ordinarily coming in and out of Park Avenue buildings, they began to move. I was in the cab, with a jacket collar pushed up over my face and dark green glasses on, waiting.

Watson told me they'd just left. I circled the block behind the building and then I waited, a few cars away from the entrance. I wanted to be able to push in front just as Denise and Lancer hit the pavement. It began to rain and the sky got darker. Cabbies act different in the rain in New York. They pray for rain and rain brings out real prey. Some didn't like me waiting there. They honked their horns at me. Shouted. I was taking up prime real estate.

"Hey buddy, wha'cha doin'?" a cabbie pulled up next to me.

"Waiting for a JFK," I said.

"Hot damn!" he said. Cabbies wait for airport fares, so why shouldn't I, I thought.

From the corner of my eye, I saw them, with O'Shaunessey holding a large umbrella, leave the building. I got off the brakes, and eased on the gas, edging up to them.

The cabbie I'd just spoken to cut me off in front of them. I was boiling. I rammed him from the rear.

He got out of his car. I could see O'Shaunessey chewing the fat with Lancer. Denise looked like a warmed-over corpse. She must not have made the switch, and this cab driver was in front of me.

"Hey, smartass, you want a bloody nose?" he said to me. "I got one for you."

I realized I was going to have to pull the trump card. I pulled out a phony cop's badge Myron had been nice enough to let me have and showed it to him. Then I whispered, "If you don't get out of here in one minute, I'll arrest you."

He turned six shades lighter, and his cab was gone.

"Mrs. Lancer looks fine today, sir," O'Shaunessey said as he opened the back door for them. Lancer motioned for Denise to get in, then shoved her in. Lancer got in.

"Where to, sir?" I said.

"One second," Lancer answered, and turned around to O'Shaunessey. "You'd better get in, too."

"Okay," O'Shaunessey said. He squeezed his large self in next to the two of them.

I pretended to be completely unimpressed. I had no idea whether Denise knew who I

was, or even who she was at the moment. She was wearing her dark glasses and looked completely relaxed. Too relaxed.

"She asleep?" O'Shaunessey asked.

Lancer nodded.

"Good girl."

Lancer told me that he was going to Long Island City in Queens, just over the bridge. I didn't complain and we took off. I repeated the address Lancer gave me so that Watson, in another cab, hopefully, would follow—at a discreet distance.

It started to rain harder. A perfect evening for a murder, I thought. Young Park Avenue matron, heavily on drugs after the death of her parents, is found in the East River. Suicide? Drug-related murder? Her older husband—then it occurred to me, while trying to stay alive myself in rainy New York rush hour traffic: maybe Mr. Lancer wasn't her husband at all.

We crossed the Queensboro Bridge and got off on Vernon Avenue in Long Island City, an "up-and-coming neighborhood" that at that moment seemed less so. Lancer directed me through a series of dark streets lined with warehouses and light manufacturing buildings till we got to a virtual cul-de-sac.

"Can you find your way back?" he said to me after they got out.

I told him I thought so. "Good, this is not the sort of place to hang around at night, my friend. Heavy drug traffic. I have to show these clients an important piece of furniture."

"Do you want me to wait?" I asked.

"No, that's all right. I'd vamoose, if I were you."

He handed me a twenty and walked away. The location made it really difficult for me to blend in. There were no other cars around, but an amazing number of human shadows. I had a small service revolver in my jacket, and I was glad for it.

I watched them disappear into a small three story building that looked as if it might once have been a garage. There were no windows at all in the front, but there was a door cut within a larger door.

I turned the cab around, got out of the blind alley, and then saw Watson.

"Man, this is one scary-ass neighborhood," he said.

I agreed with him and wondered how he'd ever got there, or ended up on foot. We went back to the garage, as I called it, and waited outside. The problem was what was I going to do now. Watson answered it for me.

"You go up on the roof, then lower yourself down to the first back window and get yourself in."

Genius. And from the South Bronx yet. "What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Go with you."

Wasn't that going to make noise? I wondered.

"I don't make noise," he said.

Getting up to the roof from the front was really easy. Just one fire escape after the next. But once up on the roof it was a different story. It was cold. Wet. Dark. Slippery. And three large rats who weren't afraid of people decided we might be playmates. Watson stepped very sharply on one, and the others decided differently. There was a skylight, but Watson told me it would be impossible to open. The only window was above a ledge, half a story down. It was a tall, narrow back window. It would be perfect. Even nicer, a drain pipe went right down to it.

I followed Watson as he lowered himself onto the pipe and down to the ledge. Very nervously, I will say, I made it to the ledge, too. Okay, I weigh forty pounds more than Watson, and I'm fifteen years older—and I didn't grow up in the South Bronx.

"Watch this," he whispered. He took a knife out of his jeans pocket, clicked it open, and cut out a lower pane of the window, right through the caulking, as cleanly as a glazer would have done it.

Then he put his hand in, unlocked the window, and we were in. "I never know why people got to break windows to get into a building," he said quietly.

"What's that?" O'Shaunessey said. We could hear their voices from three flights up.

"Rats," Lancer answered. "The place is full of them."

"Eating on these wonderful things," the doorman said. "The Westergaards had some wonderful things. How much do you think we can get for these three Impressionist paintings?"

"I know a dealer who'll give us twenty-five million cash. Wholesale," Lancer answered. "First we have to do something with our honored guest. How are you doing, dear?"

Denise didn't answer.

"How are we going to do this?" O'Shaunessey asked.

"She's going to have one more injection, then she's going to have a terrible slip into the East River."

From our perch at the next landing of the staircase (Watson was right: he was *quiet*) we could see everything. Denise was lying slumped over a crate. The place did look like a warehouse, with everything perfectly marked. *Small Paintings. Fabergé Eggs. English Silver.* I felt like I was in the basement of a museum. I also wondered why other thieves had not stolen from our thieves, but that

was their problem, not mine.

I hoped that something would happen fast because another rat, or a mouse, at least, walked across my feet.

"Maybe we'd better give her that injection now," O'Shaunessey said.

"There's no hurry," Lancer said, taking a capped hypo needle from his raincoat pocket. "You know, her body has so much drugs in it already that they'll just think she killed herself. Poor Ms. Westergaard. Heiress. Recently secretly married to a man old enough to be her father. Could never get over the deaths of her parents. Which happened while she was on vacation in Gstaad. Of course the real Tina, spoiled brat that she was, never came *back* from Gstaad. We saw to that, didn't we, O'Shaunessey? That was so good of you to tip me off."

"It had to happen," O'Shaunessey said. "We made the right phone calls in Europe, and it was all over for her. I'm getting tired of opening up doors for rich people. Let's get her off our hands right now."

Lancer slipped Denise's coat off and began to roll up the sleeve of her silk blouse. "Come on, dear," he said. "Come on."

He took the cap off the tip of the needle and pointed the naked needle into her upper arm. She screamed. "No-ooo!" What a scream. Rats, bats, even the

roaches woke up. She slapped Lancer so hard she literally knocked him over. Watson and I were amazed. "This girl can handle herself," he whispered to me. "Right?"

I nodded yes. O'Shaunessey grabbed her. "You're going to make it hard on us, aren't you?" he said to her.

I took the revolver out of my jacket pocket and walked down the stairs. "No, I am," I said.

The police came about fifteen minutes later. Luckily there was a squad car cruising outside. Lancer and O'Shaunessey tried to pull a number about how we'd broken into his building. It didn't go over at all. They listened to our story at the Long Island City precinct station, then called the D.A.'s office. Lancer and O'Shaunessey were booked on an amazing number of charges: abduction, attempted murder, and theft. This did not include a later investigation of Tina Westergaard's disappearance.

It turned out that Lancer had taken out two million dollars' worth of insurance on Tina/Denise's life. And in his possession he had a phony marriage

license and the deed to the Park Avenue apartment. The only true part of the story was that he had been a friend of the Westergaards', but had only sold them small pieces of silver and a few Oriental rugs. He'd always admired their collection, and he'd decided years before that he'd do anything to get his hands on it.

I felt really sorry for Denise. She'd learned an expensive lesson: it's quite dangerous being a single, attractive girl in New York. That's why I hope she stays with Watson, who might at least be able to get her on Broadway. Broadway and 98th Street, where they're currently living together in a small but charming brownstone one-bedroom apartment he found. He is learning all about the cuisine and culture of Ohio. She is learning... well, maybe just learning. Period.

As for me, Bill Wingo, I've decided that I'm going to start working very, very hard. Finish this screenplay. Start work on another movie. Start jogging. Start working out. Start... at least start doing all of this as soon as Hillary stops spoiling me, which she does so very well.

FICTION

The _____ Laundry Room

by
Michael Peres

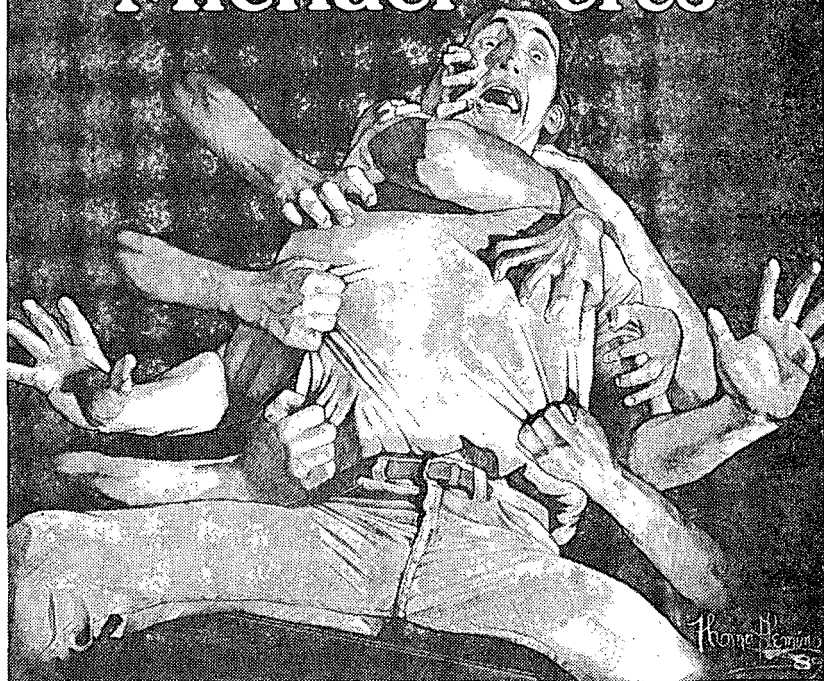


Illustration by Thomas Fleming

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The stuff was in Charlie's closet on Charlie's side of the room and Charlie had the key. Locking the closet wasn't necessary because good old roommate Sean stayed away from Charlie's closet, always kept the door to their room locked, and, like Charlie, never used the stuff. But Charlie locked the door anyhow and kept the stuff under a pile of skid-marked underwear on the floor.

Sean was a pinballer. The fifty a week cut Charlie gave Sean went into the student union game room where Sean dumped pounds of quarters into machines that seduced him with lights and electronic music and a chance at being high scorer. For two semesters Charlie had tried to convince Sean of the foolishness of throwing his money away on games, but it was no use. Sean was hooked just like other people got themselves hooked on things.

"You should talk," said Sean one night. "Sellin' stuff people put inside themselves. *Inside* themselves!"

"Someone's got to do it, Sean old buddy."

Sean laughed, threw his latest paper glider across the room.

"I mean it," said Charlie. "But maybe you're right to laugh because it's actually a bit more complicated than saying someone else would do it if I didn't. It's like this, Sean. Some people need to throw part of their life away. They really *need* to. I'm just there with the stuff. Just mindin' my own business and they find me. They *find* me, Sean. If I wasn't here they'd send a goddamn posse up to Chicago and drag pushers off the streets, make them become students, pay their goddamn tuition and room and board."

"You really believe that?" asked Sean.

"Yeah, I really believe it."

In April, storm fronts swept across the prairie dropping cats and dogs and hail onto the grass and limestone and green copper flashing of the campus. The storms usually hit at night, leaving the days wide open to Mother Sun. But one sunny afternoon, even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky, something else fell from above, something big and soft and not well-aquainted with limestone.

Maurice's brains on the steps of Montgomery Hall looked like puddles of pink acid eating into the limestone. Perhaps Maurice's brains *were* a little on the acidic side that day he fell from the fourth story window and exploded his skull all over a visiting professor of economics. After all, Charlie, along with the other pushers on campus, knew about Maurice's habit of dipping into his

own bag of goodies now and then. Charlie even tried to discourage Maurice, telling him it was bad for business.

"You're like a goddamn 'Just-say-no' billboard out on I-57," said Charlie one night to Maurice on the quad. "Hell, they see you, they will start saying no."

On the night following the so-called accidental fall from the fourth floor classroom, Charlie went to Montgomery Hall and checked out the limestone in the moonlight. Except for the shine of moisture in a crack between two slabs, there wasn't even a chip. Charlie looked closely at the moisture in the crack. The limestone had saved the day's warmth, and the thought that a few of Maurice's brain cells might be dancing in there like pinballs or sugarplums sweet on acid made him feel sick. He ran across the quad to the student union building, the night air cool on his face and hands.

In anticipation of an increase in his nightly business in the basement laundry room of his dorm, Charlie selected a pay phone at random in the union and called his cousin in St. Louis. When he told of Maurice's colorful departure, Charlie's cousin agreed business was bound to improve and ordered up a supply run. But a week later, when the supply arrived, business dropped head first like the barometer on a stormy night and Charlie began to suspect there was another main supplier on campus, someone big, someone taking over.

Back in his room after another slow night in the laundry room, Charlie buried the stuff beneath the perpetually dirty pile of underwear on the closet floor and locked the door. Then he settled back on his bunk, fished a fifty out of his wallet, and tossed it across to the other bunk where it landed against the side of Sean's peach-fuzz cheek.

"You're lucky you're gettin' that, pinballer, 'cause the laundry business sucks."

"Big deal," said Sean, straightening out the fifty. "What'd you do, get only five hundred this week?"

"Not even that much."

"How much then? If you don't mind telling me."

"Three hundred."

"I see," said Sean, using the fifty for a page marker and tossing the copy of *Catcher in the Rye* he'd been reading on his desk. "Tell me something, Charlie. You ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

"You mean downstairs?" said Charlie. "You mean those wise-assed Christians from the Bible club? Hell, they watch everyone. A guy taps his foot on the crapper floor, they're right there with a Jesus pamphlet tucked behind the toilet paper roll. Girl has an off period, next thing you know she's got a flock of Mary Magdalenes around her."

"That's not what I meant," said Sean.

"What, then?"

"A guy. I saw a guy following you today."

"Where?"

"On the quad."

"Hell, everybody follows everybody on the quad."

Sean sat up on the edge of his bunk. "No, I mean after you left the quad he was still following you. He followed you all the way here. He followed you on the shortcut behind the tennis courts. You don't have to believe me if you don't want to, Charlie. But he followed you right up to our floor, came in behind another guy, got through the locked hall door, saw you come in here, then almost bumped into me turning around."

The other pusher. It had to be. The one taking over. The one who probably dumped Maurice out the window so he could get his share. And now the guy was after him.

"What did he look like?"

"He looked just like any other student," said Sean, smiling.

Charlie stood, kicked his laundry basket across the room. "Shit! You're a big help! For all I know this guy could be after my ass!"

"Calm down," said Sean, still smiling like an idiot.

"Why should I calm down?"

Sean picked up *Catcher in the Rye* again and flipped to the page marked with the fifty. "You should calm down because I risked my goddamn neck following him back to *his* goddamn dorm. I know what room he's in and I know his name."

A week later the name Sean had given Charlie was all over the university. Jason Robert Stone was found dead in his dormitory room on the south side of the campus. The campus police told reporters from the town papers and reporters from the school paper that Stone had died of a drug overdose, apparently self-inflicted. A large supply of "illegal substances" had been found in the room, and state police narcotics officials were questioning Stone's roommate.

The school year was coming to an end. In two weeks finals would start and then the summer exodus would begin. It was hot in the dorm. Whenever a door opened, the sound of a window fan going full blast could be heard. The halls in the dorm were windy and ripe and hot. The only cool place in the dorm was the basement. Students spent more time in the basement in this weather. Instead of starting their laundry and returning to their rooms, students retired to the basement lounge where others had gone to study and seek relief from the unseasonable May heat wave.

Whenever Sean was out of their room, Charlie also went into the basement. Sometimes he'd be there until midnight, sitting at a table hitting the books just like the others. Or sometimes he'd just sit and think.

Tonight in the laundry room had been the worst night so far. A lousy quarter ounce of grass. So much stuff was hidden upstairs in his locked closet he was worried about going home for summer break. What if he was caught with all that stuff? Maybe he should call his cousin, tell him to come up and get it.

After Stone's death, after a second supplier had gone to his final high, Charlie thought business would surely have picked up. But it hadn't. And now his greatest fear, in fact the reason he was afraid to be alone, was his knowledge that there must be yet another supplier, bigger than Stone, maybe a mob connection muscling in. Something. Someone. Why else would two pushers get snuffed and business continue going down?

During the last few days Charlie had made a decision. Next year he would be clean. Next year he'd study like crazy, maybe even get one of those lousy minimum wage jobs in the cafeteria and join the rest of the world in their poverty. Hell, at least they didn't have to worry about getting snuffed by some hoods' Monopoly games.

If it wasn't for the cash he owed his cousin, he might have flushed the stuff down the crapper and started his new life right now. But he did owe the money. And there were still two of weeks of classes left. And finals were coming up with all that staying awake beforehand and all that celebrating afterward. At least maybe he'd get rid of the speed and the grass and the coke. At least maybe he'd break even. Then he could decide whether to risk the trip back to St. Louis, or to give the university sewage system an all-time high.

Charlie looked at the other students in the lounge. A few had

their heads down on their books. A few kept awake drinking coffee from the vending machine. A few chainsmoked cigarettes. At a small table in one corner a couple embraced, the guy pushing his hand beneath the girl's blouse. At a long table in another corner several guys and girls with crispy collars read to one another from dogeared Bibles. There were tall students, short students, fat students, skinny students. All different, yet in some ways all the same. And next year he'd be just like the rest of them. He'd be twenty-one then, but he'd be younger. He'd be out of the goddamn stuff and be dry and on a natural high just like them.

That would make Sean happy. Good old roommate Sean, who'd found a girlfriend and gotten off the machine habit and, lately, didn't even want his cut. Good old Sean probably doing it for him, showing him he didn't need the fifty a week. And the other night, right in the middle of the night as if he were dreaming or something, there was Sean telling him to quit, to get the hell out of the drug business. Maybe that's what friends were for. To tell a person what they can't see for themselves.

After midnight the lounge began clearing out. On their way through the door the group of guys and girls who had been reading their Bibles glanced back at Charlie, and he remembered that on two previous nights they had also glanced at him. Charlie stood, followed the group up the stairs, listened to them complain about the hot weather. One of the guys said something about a cold shower. One of the girls said something about a cold front coming through sometime that night.

When Charlie got to the room, Sean was looking out the window. The window fan was turned off and on the floor. The room was hot.

"What's out there?"

Sean kept staring out the window. "A storm's coming. I can see the lightning in the distance. It's up high. Great big cumulonimbus guys. That means it's a heavy duty storm." Sean turned around. "Where've you been?"

"In the basement."

"Big crowd down there?"

"There was. They all started coming up a while ago."

"How was business tonight?"

"Worse than ever. I'm going to quit."

Sean sat on his bunk and stared at him. "Really?"

"Yeah. Why so surprised?"

"I don't know," said Sean. "I guess I just didn't expect it."

"Don't you think I should quit?"

"Sure," said Sean, standing and slapping Charlie on the back. "Hell yes."

In the dream Charlie was in a large factory. Several men in white lab coats and hard hats followed him around. He could not tell what the factory was making. He was simply aware of the clatter of an assembly line high above and the opening and closing of an overhead door at the far end of the building. Whatever was being manufactured—perhaps cars—was being turned out quite rapidly. Other than this, all he knew was that the men following him around were his employees and that the factory was his responsibility. A large, noisy factory with the rumbling of machinery and a voice over a loudspeaker giving orders.

When Charlie opened his eyes, the opening and closing door became lightning, the rumbling of the factory became thunder, and the voice over the PA said, "Go to the basement shelter immediately. A tornado has been sighted."

He and Sean got to the basement quick enough to get seats in the lounge. Others, who came down later, stood around or sat against the wall. A few had brought blankets with them and draped the blankets about their shoulders. It was an odd assembly. Some of the guys wore no shirts and the absence of bras was quite apparent on the T-shirt fronts of many of the girls.

Charlie remembered a tornado alert the previous year. Knocked out of bed in the middle of the night like during fire drills or those finals'-week false alarms. Everyone staying in their own world at first, trying to maintain a level of sleepiness and privacy they'd been deprived of. But it was different tonight. Everyone seemed more awake. And, although there was little talking, everyone seemed to be glancing at one another as if waiting for something to happen. Perhaps it was the storm they were waiting for. Perhaps it was the rapid drop in atmospheric pressure caused by the storm that had affected everyone.

When a crack of thunder shook the cement floor and the lights went out, there were a few muted screams and moans. Then it was quiet.

The emergency lighting at the door and in the hall was just bright enough to see outlines. Although Charlie could not see Sean, he could see the dark profiles of those between him and the door. Halfway between him and the door he saw a group of heads move

close together. He saw lips moving rapidly and heard the hiss of whispers.

Another crack of thunder shook the building. Charlie leaned toward Sean and whispered, "What's going on over there?"

But Sean did not answer, and when Charlie reached out he felt that Sean's chair was empty. He reached out to the other side. That chair was also empty.

"All right, I think it's time." It was a girl's voice, a girl addressing everyone in the lounge.

Charlie expected someone to say, "Time for what?" or a smart comment, like some guy saying it was time to jump the girl who had spoken out. Maybe the girl had fallen asleep and was dreaming.

"Do we have to do it?" Now a guy had spoken, a guy sitting pretty close.

"We have to do it because it's what we all decided," said another guy.

Suddenly there were hands on Charlie's shoulders, then on his back and sides and legs. He tried to pull away but there were too many hands. He felt the chair drop away as he was lifted. He saw the emergency light of the doorway come closer, then recede as he was carried out into the hallway.

A girl near his ear said, "Pretty ironic that we should do it in the laundry room."

Another girl said, "Shut up."

"Hey!" said Charlie, realizing it had come out like a laugh. "What is this crap!"

No one answered. He was placed on the laundry room floor at the end of the row of dryers. The emergency light was behind them. He could not see their faces. It felt like hundreds of hands were holding him down and he wondered how people could get so close together to have all those hands on him.

Then he saw it. The hands holding his left arm had repositioned, had twisted his hand palm up, and a syringe was there sparkling in the glare of the emergency light.

"What's that?" he screamed.

A guy's voice hot and wet was at his ear. "Just some of your stuff, Charlie. We're just giving it back to you. Call it a sampler. A little coke, a little acid. Hell, a little of everything."

"Sean! Sean, are you here?"

"I'm here, Charlie."

"Do something!"

"I can't, Charlie. It was a two-thirds majority."

"But I'm quitting! Goddamn it! I'm quitting!"

"It's too late," said Sean.

"Yeah," said a girl. "Look at it this way. We're just saying no to drugs."

"All right," said another girl standing behind the syringe. "Let's get on with it."

When they put him in the clothes dryer he felt as though he consisted of only head and torso. His arms and legs were there but he could not move them. He could see. He could look through the round window of the dryer. But no matter how hard he tried he could not lift his arms and push open the door, not even after he heard the all-clear announcement, not even after they had put in the coins and disappeared from beneath the emergency light over the doorway.

He was alone. He was alone and the dream came back. Except in this dream *he* was on the assembly line and his flesh was being torn from him by a thousand mechanical hands. The hands were different colors, green and pink and red. Someone had put miniature pairs of underwear on the hands as if each pair of fingers was a set of legs. It should have been funny as hell, those fingers in underwear, but it wasn't.

The tornado had passed to the south of the university, stirring up the dirt on a freshly plowed field and knocking down one of the main power lines supplying the campus. By the time the power came back on and all the fans started churning up the air in the dorm, everyone was back in his bunk. Everyone except Charlie. He was down in the basement laundry room getting dry.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

One Too Many

by Dorothy
L. Sayers

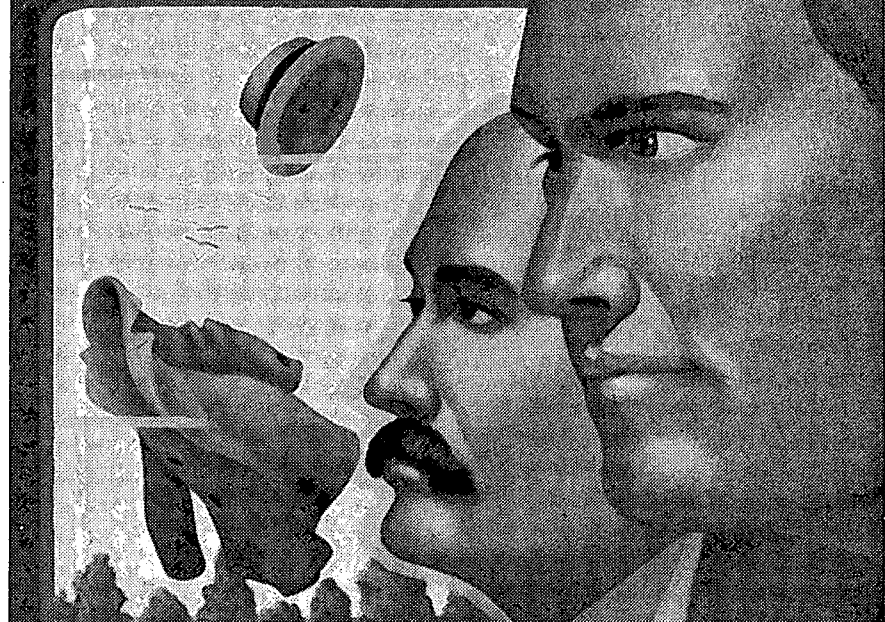


Illustration by Mark Fresh

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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Simon Grant, the Napoleon of Consolidated Nitro-Phosphates and Heaven knows how many affiliated companies, vanished off the face of the earth one rainy November night, it would have been, in any case, only natural that his family and friends should be disturbed, and that there should be a slight flurry on the Stock Exchange. But when, in the course of the next few days, it became painfully evident that Consolidated Nitro-Phosphates had been consolidated in nothing but the name—that they were, in fact, not even ripe for liquidation, but had (so to speak) already passed that point and evaporated into thin air, such assets as they possessed having mysteriously disappeared at the same time as Simon Grant—then the hue-and-cry went out with a noise that shook three continents and, incidentally, jogged Mr. Montague Egg for an hour or so out of his blameless routine.

Not that Mr. Egg had any money in Nitro-Phosphates, or could claim any sort of acquaintance with the missing financier. His connection with the case was entirely fortuitous, the by-product of a savage budgetary announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which threatened to have alarming results for the wine and spirits trade. Mr. Egg, traveling representative of Messrs. Plummet & Rose of Piccadilly, had reached Birmingham in his wanderings when he was urgently summoned back to town by his employers for a special conference upon policy, and thus—though he did not know it at the time—he enjoyed the distinction of traveling by the very train from which Simon Grant so suddenly and unaccountably vanished.

The facts in the case of Simon Grant were disconcertingly simple. At this time the L.M.S. Railway were running a night express from Birmingham to London which, leaving Birmingham at 9:05, stopped only at Coventry and Rugby before running into Euston at 12:10. Mr. Grant had attended a dinner given in his honor by certain prominent businessmen in Coventry, and after dinner had had the unblushing effrontery to make a speech about the Prosperity of British Business. After this, he had hastened away to take the Birmingham express as far as Rugby, where he was engaged to stay the night with that pillar of financial rectitude, Lord Buddlethorp. He was seen into a first class carriage at 9:57 by two eminently respectable Coventry magnates, who had remained chatting with him till the train started. There was one other person in his carriage—no less a man, in fact, than Sir Hicklebury Bowles, the well-known sporting baronet. In the course of conversation, he

had mentioned to Sir Hicklebury (whom he knew slightly) that he was traveling alone, his secretary having succumbed to an attack of influenza. About half way between Coventry and Rugby, Mr. Grant had gone out into the corridor, muttering something about the heat. He had never been seen again.

At first, a very sinister light had been thrown on the incident by the fact that a door in the corridor, a little way up the train, had been found swinging open at Rugby, and the subsequent discovery of Mr. Grant's hat and overcoat a few miles farther up the line had led everybody to fear the worst. Careful examination, however, failed to produce either Simon Grant's corpse or any evidence of any heavy body having fallen from the train. In a pocket of the overcoat was a first class ticket from Coventry to Rugby, and it seemed clear that, without this, he could not have passed the barrier at Rugby. Moreover, Lord Buddlethorp had sent his car with a chauffeur and a footman to meet the train at Rugby. The chauffeur had stood at the barrier and the footman had paraded the platform in search of the financier. Both knew him very well by sight, and between them they asserted positively that he had never left the train. Nobody had arrived at the barrier ticketless, or with the wrong ticket, and a checkup of the tickets issued for Rugby at Birmingham and Coventry revealed no discrepancy.

There remained two possibilities, both tempting and plausible. The Birmingham-London express reached Rugby at 10:24, departing again at 10:28. But, swift and impressive as it was, it was not the only, or the most important, pebble on the station beach, for over against it upon the down line was the Irish Mail, snorting and blowing in its three minute halt before it roared away northwards at 10:25. If the express had been on time, Simon Grant might have slipped across and boarded it, and been at Holyhead by 2:25 to catch the steamer, and be in Dublin by 6:35, and Heaven only knew where a few hours after. As for the confident assertion of Lord Buddlethorp's footman, a trifling disguise—easily assumed in a lavatory or an empty compartment—would be amply sufficient to deceive him. To Chief Inspector Peacock, in charge of the investigations, the possibility appeared highly probable. It had also the advantage that the passengers crossing by the mailboat could be readily reckoned up and accounted for.

The question of tickets now became matter for inquiry. It was not likely that Simon Grant would have tried to secure them during his hasty one minute dash for the Mail. Either he had taken them

beforehand, or some accomplice had met him at Rugby and handed them over. Chief Inspector Peacock was elated when he discovered that tickets covering the train-and-steamer route from Rugby to Dublin had actually been purchased for the night in question from the L.M.S. agents in London in the absurd and incredible name of Solomon Grundy. Mr. Peacock was well acquainted with the feeble cunning which prompts people, when adopting an alias, to cling to their own initials. The underlying motive is, no doubt, a dread lest those same initials, inscribed on a watch, cigarette case, or what-not, should arouse suspicion, but the tendency is so well known that the choice of initials arouses in itself the very suspicion it is intended to allay. Mr. Peacock's hopes rose very high indeed when he discovered, in addition, that Solomon Grundy (Great Heavens, what a name!) had gone out of his way to give a fictitious and, indeed, nonexistent address to the man at the ticket office. And then, just when the prospect seemed at its brightest, the whole theory received its death-blow. Not only had no Mr. Solomon Grundy traveled by the mailboat that night or any night—not only had his ticket never been presented or even cancelled—but it turned out to be impossible that Mr. Simon Grant should have boarded the Irish Mail at all. For some tedious and infuriating reason connected with an overheated axle box, the Birmingham-London express, on that night of all nights, had steamed into Rugby three minutes behind time and two minutes after the departure of the Mail. If this had been Simon Grant's plan of escape, something had undoubtedly gone wrong with it.

And, that being so, Chief Inspector Peacock came back to the old question: What had become of Simon Grant?

Talking it over with his colleagues, the chief inspector came eventually to the conclusion that Grant had, in fact, intended to take the Irish Mail, leaving the open door and the scattered garments behind him by way of confusing the trail for the police. What, then, would he do, when he found the Mail already gone? He could only leave the station and take another train. He had not left the station by the barrier, and careful inquiry convinced Mr. Peacock that it would have been extremely difficult for him to make his way out along the line unobserved, or hang about the railway premises till the following morning. An unfortunate suicide had taken place only the previous week, which had made the railwaymen particularly observant of stray passengers who might attempt to wander on to the permanent way; and, in addition, there

happened to be two gangs of platelayers working with flares at points strategically placed for observation. So that Peacock, while not altogether dismissing this part of the investigation, turned it over as routine work to his subordinates, and bent his mind to consider a second main possibility that had already occurred to him before he had been led away by speculations on the Irish Mail.

This was, that Simon Grant had never left the express at all, but had gone straight through to Euston. London has great advantages as a hiding-place—and what better thing could Grant have done, when his first scheme failed him, than return to the express and continue his journey? His watch would have warned him, before he reached Rugby, that the Mail had probably left; a hasty inquiry and a quick dash to the booking office, and he would be ready to continue his journey.

The only drawback was that when the chief inspector questioned the officials in the booking office he was met by the positive statement that no ticket of any kind had been issued that night later than 10:15. Nor yet had any passenger arrived at Euston minus a ticket. And the possibility of an accomplice on the platform had now to be dismissed, since the original plan of escape had not involved an accomplice, and it was not reasonable to suppose that one had been provided beforehand for such an emergency.

But, argued the chief inspector, the emergency might have been foreseen and a ticket purchased in advance. And if so, it was going to be extremely difficult to prove, since the number of tickets issued would correspond with the number of passengers. He set in train, however, an exhaustive investigation into the question of the tickets issued in London, Birmingham, Coventry, and Rugby during the few weeks previous to the disappearance, thinking that he might easily light upon a return half which had come to hand very much subsequent to the date of issue, and that this might suggest a line of inquiry. In addition, he sent out a broadcast appeal, and this is where his line of inquiry impinged upon the orbit of Mr. Montague Egg.

"To the Chief Commissioner of Police. —Dear Sir,"
wrote Mr. Egg in his neat commercial hand,
"understanding as per the daily press and the B.B.C. that
you desire to receive communications from all persons trav-
eling by the 9:05 P.M. Birmingham-London express on the
4th ult., I beg to inform you that I traveled by same (3rd

class) from Coventry to Euston on the date mentioned and that I am entirely at your disposal for all enquiries. Being attached to the firm of Plummet & Rose, wine and spirit merchants, Piccadilly, as traveling representative, my permanent address will not find me at present, but I beg to enclose a list of hotels where I shall be staying in the immediate future and remain, dear sir, yours faithfully."

In consequence of this letter, Mr. Egg was one evening mysteriously called out of the commercial room at the Cat and Fiddle in Oldham to speak with a Mr. Peacock.

"Pleased, I'm sure," said Mr. Egg, prepared for anything from a colossal order for wine and spirits to a forgotten acquaintance with a bad-luck story. "Monty-on-the-spot, that's me. What can I do for you, sir?"

Chief Inspector Peacock appeared to want every conceivable detail of information about Mr. Egg, his affairs, and, in particular, his late journey to town. Monty disposed capably of the preliminaries and mentioned that he had arrived at the station with plenty of time to spare, and so had contrived to get a seat as soon as the train came in.

"And I was glad I did," he added. "I like to be comfortable, you know, and the train was rather crowded."

"I know it was crowded," said Mr. Peacock, with a groan. "And well I may, when I tell you that we have had to get in touch with every single person on that train, and interview as many of them as we could get hold of personally."

"Some job," said Mr. Egg, with the respect of one expert interviewer to another. "Do you mean you've got in touch with them all?"

"Every blessed one," said Mr. Peacock, "including several officious nuisances who weren't there at all, but hoped for a spot of notoriety."

"Talking of spots," said Monty, "what will you take?"

Mr. Peacock thanked him, and accepted a small whiskey and soda. "Can you remember at all what part of the train you were in?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Egg promptly. "Third class smoker, middle of the coach, middle of the train. Safest, you know, in case of accidents. Corner seat, corridor side, facing engine. Immediately opposite me, picture of York Minister, being visited by two ladies and

a gentleman, in costumes of 1904 or thereabouts. Noticed it particularly, because everything else about the train was up to date. Thought it a pity."

"Hum," said Mr. Peacock. "Do you remember who else was in the compartment at Coventry?"

Monty screwed up his eyes as though to squeeze recollection out through his eyelids.

"Next me, stout, red, bald man, very sleepy, in tweeds. Been having one or two. He'd come from Birmingham. Next him, lanky young chap with pimples and a very bad bowler. Got in after me and tripped over my feet. Looked like a clerk. And a young sailor in the corner seat—there when I arrived. Talked all the time to the fellow in the corner opposite, who looked like some sort of a parson—collar round the wrong way, clerical hat, walrus mustache, dark spectacles, puffy cheeks, and a tell-me-my-good-man way of talking. Next him—oh! yes, a fellow smoking a pipe of horrible scented sort of tobacco—might have been a small tradesman, but I didn't see much of him, because he was reading a paper most of the time. Then there was a nice, inoffensive, gentlemanly old bird who needed a haircut. He had pince-nez—very crooked—and never took his eyes off a learned-looking book. And opposite me there was a chap with a big brown beard in a yellow inverness cloak—foreign-looking—with a big, soft felt hat. He came from Birmingham, and so did the parson, but the other two on that side got in after I did."

The chief inspector smiled as he turned over the pages of a formidable bunch of documents. "You're an admirable witness, Mr. Egg. Your account tallies perfectly with those of your seven fellow-travelers, but it's the only one of the eight that's complete. You are obviously observant."

"My job," said Monty complacently.

"Of course. You may be interested to know that the gentlemanly old bird with the long hair was Professor Amblefoot of London University, the great authority of the higher calculus, and that he described you as a fairhaired, well-mannered young man."

"Much obliged to him, I'm sure," said Mr. Egg.

"The foreigner is Dr. Schleicher of Kew—resident there three years—the sailor and the parson we know all about—the drunk chap is okay, too—we had his wife along, very voluble—the tradesman is a well-known Coventry resident, something to do with the church council of St. Michael's, and the pimply lad is one of Messrs.

Morrison's clerks. They're all square. And they all went through to town, didn't they? Nobody left at Rugby?"

"Nobody," said Mr. Egg.

"Pity," said the chief inspector. "The truth is, Mr. Egg, that we can't hear of any person in the train who hasn't come forward and given an account of himself, and the number of people who have come forward precisely corresponds with the number of tickets collected at the barriers at Euston. You didn't observe any person continually hanging about the corridor, I suppose?"

"Not permanently," said Monty. "The chap with the beard got up and prowled a bit from time to time, I remember—seemed restless. I thought he perhaps didn't feel very well. But he'd only be absent a few minutes at a time. He seemed to be a nervous, unpleasant sort of chap—chewed his nails, you know, and muttered in German, but he—"

"Chewed his nails?"

"Yes. Very unpleasant, I must say. 'Well-kept hands that please the sight seize the trade and hold it tight, but bitten nails and grubby claws well may give the buyer pause.' So the *Salesman's Handbook* says"—and Monty smirked gently at his own fingertips. "This person's hands were—definitely not gentlemanly. Bitten to the quick."

"But that's really extraordinary," said Peacock. "Dr. Schleicher's hands are particularly well kept. I interviewed him myself yesterday. Surely he can't suddenly have abandoned the habit of nail-biting? People don't—not like that. And why should he? Was there anything else you noticed about the man opposite you?"

"I don't think so. Yes. Stop a moment. He smoked cigars at a most extraordinary rate. I remember his going out into the corridor with one smoked down to about an inch and coming back, five minutes afterwards, with a new one smoked half way through. Full-sized Coronas too—good ones; and I know quite a bit about cigars."

Peacock stared and then smote his hand lightly upon the table.

"I've got it!" he said. "I remember where I met a set of badly chewed-up nails lately. By Jove! Yes, but how could he . . ."

Monty waited for enlightenment.

"Simon Grant's secretary. He was supposed to be in town all that day and evening, having 'flu—but how do I know that he was? But, even so, what good could he do by being in the train in disguise? And what could Dr. Schleicher have to do with it? It's Simon Grant

we want—and Schleicher isn't Grant—at least—” the chief inspector paused and went on more dubiously “—I don't see how he could be. They know him well in the district, though he's said to be away from home a good deal, and he's got a wife—”

“Oh, has he?” said Mr. Egg, with a meaning emphasis.

“A double life, you mean?” said the chief inspector.

“And a double wife,” said Mr. Egg. “You will pardon my asking a delicate question, but—er—are you certain you would spot a false beard at once, if you weren't altogether expecting it?”

“In a good light, I probably should, but by the light of the doctor's reading lamp— But what's the game, Mr. Egg? If Schleicher is Grant, who was the man you saw in the train—the man with the bitten fingernails? Grant doesn't bite his nails, I know that—he's rather particular about his appearance, so I'm told, though I've never met him myself.”

“Well,” said Mr. Egg, “since you ask me, why shouldn't the other man in the train be all three of them?”

“All three of which?”

“Grant and Schleicher and the secretary.”

“I don't quite get you.”

“Well, I mean—supposing Grant is Schleicher, with a nice ready-made personality all handy for him to step into, built up, as you may say, over the last three years, with money salted away in the name of Schleicher—well, I mean, there he is, as you might say, waiting to slip over to the Continent as soon as the fuss has died down—complete with unofficial lady.”

“But the secretary?”

“The secretary was the man in train, made up as Grant made up as Schleicher. I mean, speaking as a fool, I thought he might be.”

“But where was Schleicher—I mean, Grant?”

“He was the man in the train, too. I mean, he may have been.”

“Do you mean there were two of them?”

“Yes—at least, that's how I see it. You're the best judge, and I shouldn't like to put myself forward. But they'd be playing Box and Cox. Secretary gets in at Birmingham as Schleicher. Grant gets in at Coventry as Grant. Between Coventry and Rugby Grant changes to Schleicher in a washplace or somewhere, and hangs about the platform and corridor till the train starts with him in it. He retires presently into a washplace again. At a prearranged moment, secretary gets up, walks along the corridor and retires

elsewhere, while Grant comes out and takes his place. Presently Grant walks down the corridor and secretary comes back to the compartment. They're never both visible at the same time, except for the two or three minutes while Grant is re-entering the train at Rugby, while honest witnesses like me are ready to come forward and swear that Schleicher got in at Birmingham, sat tight in his seat at Coventry and Rugby, and went straight through to Euston—as he did. I can't say I noticed any difference between the two Schleichers, except in the matter of the cigar. But they were very hairy and muffled up."

The chief inspector turned this over in his mind.

"Which of them was Schleicher when they got out at Euston?"

"Grant, surely. The secretary would remove his disguise at the last moment and emerge as himself, taking the thousand-to-one chance of somebody recognizing him."

Peacock swore softly. "If that's what he did," he exclaimed, "we've got him on toast. Wait a moment, though. I *knew* there was a snag. If that's what they did, there ought to have been an extra third class ticket at Euston. They can't both have traveled on one ticket."

"Why not?" said Mr. Egg. "I have often—at least, I don't exactly mean that, but I have from time to time laid a wager with an acquaintance that I would travel on his ticket, and got away with it."

"Perhaps," said Chief Inspector Peacock, "you would oblige me, sir, by outlining your method."

"Oh, certainly," said Mr. Egg. "Speak the truth with cheerful ease if you would both convince and please"—Monty's favorite motto. If I had been Mr. Grant's secretary, I'd have taken a return ticket from Birmingham to London, and when the outward half had been inspected for the last time at Rugby, I'd pretend to put it in my pocket. But I wouldn't really. I'd shove it down at the edge of my seat and go for my stroll along the corridor. Then when Grant took my place—recognizing the right seat by an attaché case, or something of that sort left on it—he'd retrieve the ticket and retain it. At the end of the journey, I'd slip off my beard and spectacles and so on, stick them in my overcoat pocket, and fold the conspicuous overcoat inside-out and carry it on my arm. Then I'd wait to see Grant get out, and follow him up to the barrier, keeping a little way behind. He'd go through, giving up his ticket, and I'd follow along with a bunch of other people, making a little bustle and confusion in the gateway. The ticket collector would stop me and

say: 'I haven't got your ticket, sir.' I'd be indignant, and say: 'Oh, yes, you have.' He'd say: 'I don't think so, sir.' Then I'd protest, and he'd probably ask me to stand aside a minute while he dealt with the other passengers. Then I'd say: 'See here, my man, I'm quite sure I gave up my ticket. Look! Here's the return half, number so-and-so. Just look through your bunch and see if you haven't got the companion half.' He looks and he finds it, and says: 'I beg your pardon, sir; you're quite right. Here it is.' I say: 'Don't mention it,' and go through. And even if he suspects me, he can't prove anything, and the other fellow is well out of the way by that time."

"I see," said the chief inspector. "How often did you say you had indulged in this little game?"

"Well, never twice at the same station. It doesn't do to repeat one's effects too often."

"I think I'd better interview Schleicher and his secretary again," said Peacock pensively. "And the ticket collector. I suppose we were meant to think that Grant had skipped to the Irish Mail. I admit we should have thought so but for the accident that the Mail left before the London train came in. However, it takes a clever criminal to beat our organization. By the way, Mr. Egg, I hope you will not make a habit—"

"Talking of bad habits," said Monty happily, "what about another spot?"

SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":

- #1: Truthteller; innocent
- #2: Truthteller; innocent
- #3: Liar; guilty
- #4: Truthteller; guilty
- #5: Liar; innocent
- #6: Liar; innocent
- #7: Liar; innocent
- #8: Truthteller; guilty
- #9: Liar; guilty
- #10: Foreman; innocent
- #11: Truthteller; guilty
- #12: Truthteller; guilty

There were six truthtellers and five liars. The jury was split: six voted guilty, six innocent.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Patricia Ostad

Inspector Luke Thanet and his partner, Detective Sergeant Mike Lineham, have been evicted from their office during a spurt of redecorating at police headquarters in Sturrenden. This is just one more burden for Thanet, who is particularly concerned about the unusual behavior of his daughter Bridget. Now, on top of everything else, Marcia Salden, a strong-willed and not particularly likable woman, has been found in the River Teale in the small village of Telford Green. As is usual, Thanet must convince his superiors that there is more to this **Suspicious Death** (Scribners, \$16.95, 248 pp) than meets the eye. Author Dorothy Simpson provides a lot of people with motive, and the tight front maintained by the tiny British village against outsiders—both the police and the Saldens—as well as the way Thanet handles his family's problems make this book a delight to read.

Celia Dale's Detective David "Wally" Simpson of London is investigating a "suspicious death," too. A little old pensioner has been found dead in her rooms of an apparent overdose of sleeping pills. The problem is that she never had a prescription for pills, nor did she know anyone who would have given them to her. And her rooms are remarkably bare of anything of value. **Sheep's Clothing** (Doubleday, \$12.95, 184 pp) is presented in two parts—the first from the point of view of some con women and the second from

the point of view of the police. This very interesting little mystery ties the two parts together in a real about-face ending.

If you are one of those mystery readers who also like espionage novels, particularly those in the style of Tom Clancy, try **Storming Intrepid** by Payne Harrison, (Crown, \$19.95, 480 pp). If you haven't read anything in this subgenre, it may be the place to start. Plotted around the hijacking of the United States space shuttle Intrepid at some time in the near future, Harrison incorporates overflights of Russia by the SR-71 Blackbird and the Stealth bomber; the maiden flight of a "space fighter" called the Kestrel; the launching of a Russian shuttle, Soyuz, and freighter rocker; and the flight of a MIG-29 Fulcrum. We meet the head of space programs at Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming, and his aides; a United States president and vice president as well as their cabinet; the new French president; the Russian general secretary, the head of the KGB and numerous politburo members. While part of the fun is deciphering who these people *really* are, the book has enough suspense to keep the reader awake to the wee small hours. Particularly nice is the summing up, where the futures of the major characters are revealed. And there is a twist in the ending that lends real authority to the story line. The book comes highly recommended from espionage fans and former NASA personnel as well as this mystery reader.

He Huffed and He Puffed by Barbara Paul (Scribners, \$16.95, 219 pp) is set in New York amidst an attempted business takeover by corporate wolf A. J. Strode. Strode always gets his way, and he wants House of Glass. But three stockholders won't sell, and without them, he can't take control. When Strode is murdered—stabbed by three knives, each belonging to one of the holdouts—Detective Marian Larch and her partner Ivan Malecki investigate this variation on a country house/locked room murder. Written in three parts—the first from the point of view of Strode; the second from the eyes of the three stockholders; and the third from the point of view of the police—this mystery has some interesting twists.

Reginald Hill's collection, **There Are No Ghosts in the Soviet Union** (Foul Play Press, \$16.95, 230 pp) consists of a novella-length police procedural set in Moscow, which gives the book its title, and five short stories. "Auteur Theory" is a narration of a fictional filming of Hill's own *An Advancement of Learning*, told in part from the point of view of the actor who plays Pascoe, and very wryly acquaints the reader with what might happen if an author's work is "adulterated" by another. Hill actually makes an appear-

ance in this story. "Bring Back the Cat" stars a West Indian resident of London on his first case as a P.I., searching for a missing cat. "The Bull Ring" is set at a British military training camp in France during World War I. Each story has a twist at the end, a not-quite-expected explanation which rings true in the context of the mystery. And each has a slightly eerie quality.

Miss Emily Simpson and Miss Lucy Bellringer had a longstanding contest: the one who found the first spurred coral-root orchid in bloom each year got to prepare a feast for the other. Both had been at school together and had become teachers, and both were well liked in the village of Badger's Drift. When Emily is found dead, Lucy is convinced that it was not death by natural causes. She complains to the police, and after some attempts to mollify her, she is passed on to Inspector Barnaby. **The Killings at Badger's Drift** by Caroline Graham (Avon, \$3.50, 249 pp) follows him through a village where everyone knew Emily—nearly everyone had taken English from her—to uncover a number of possible motives for her death. Excellent characterization and a fine sense of place, coupled with a hint of underlying evil and decay in this country village, make for a fine read.

Roma Greth provides insight into the many types of "plain" people who inhabit the Pennsylvania Dutch country in **Plain Murder** (Pageant, \$3.50, 339 pp). The heroine, and amateur detective, is Hana Shaner, the owner of a carpet and fabric mill famous for its "Dutch Blue" color. Hana is Pennsylvania Dutch, but worldly, not plain. Her housekeeper, Sal Nunemacher, a Mennonite, leads Hana to an Old Order Amish farm where a boy has been found dead. Hana has the police called in but, after meeting Sergeant Kochen, determines that the police will have no real compassion for the plain people. This isn't Hana's first brush with murder, but Kochen, who really is a competent policeman, wishes she had not made this case her second one, especially when she starts bringing up the subject of her hexes and witchcraft. A nicely convoluted plot, intertwined with the customs and beliefs of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

Isabel Holland has written a suspenseful novel about the kidnapping of a little boy—son of an alcoholic mother and a globe-trotting father—from a doughnut shop in New York City. The father is the suspect, since he had arranged to meet with the little boy. In **Bump in the Night** (Doubleday, \$16.95, 185 pp), the reader follows the attempts of the mother to find her son while kicking her alcohol habit cold-turkey, and the attempts of the father to

clear himself by working with Detective Mooney. Interspersed in the narrative about the search are reflections of the kidnapper and of the kidnapped boy. A quick read with remarkably well-drawn characterizations of all the participants and some suspense as the mother, the police, and the father close in on the kidnapper.

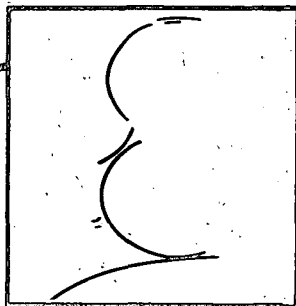
Clarissa Watson's **Somebody Killed the Messenger** (Atheneum, \$16.95, 183 pp) brings back Persis Willum, painter, gallery worker, and amateur sleuth, when a scandalous picture arrives practically unannounced at an exclusive showing in the gallery in Gull Harbor. The owner of the gallery and Persis' boss, Gregor Olitsky, sends Persis to Amsterdam to investigate when it turns out that the source of the painting, Seraphine Bracely, is missing. This fifth art world mystery starring Persis Willum will appeal to those intrigued by artists, the artistic temperament, and the international art scene.

Pierre-Ange (Pete) Sawyer, half French, half American private eye, lives on the French Riviera and investigates crimes with his partner, former resistance fighter Fritz Donhoff. When he finds that Fritz has been shot down in the streets of Paris, he gets involved in Fritz's last case—security for an antiquities expert who is to contact some grave robbers and authenticate an Etruscan treasure. **The Last Smile** (Fawcett, \$3.50, 215 pp) is the fifth entry in Marvin Albert's Stone Angel series. Details about the Etruscans, tomb robbing, and art forgery make this one particularly entertaining.

The concept is not an unusual one—a man, obsessed with a woman, follows her, harasses her, and threatens her and her friends so much that she must resort to legal injunctions to keep him away from her; it's behind K. K. Beck's latest, non-series suspense novel, **Unwanted Attentions** (Walker, \$17.95, 220 pp). Rebecca Kendall has been running from Benjamin Knapp, literally and figuratively, for over fifteen years. Now she is engaged to a very handsome, successful stockbroker in San Francisco. But Benjamin reappears—and then disappears; Rebecca is charged with his murder. When the book ends, Rebecca is changed, subtly but eerily, and it leaves the reader wondering whether she is a "type" who attracts this kind of erotomaniac. A highly suspenseful novel.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



In some respects, *The Courier* brings to mind the 1982 French film *Diva*. That was a small, quirky thriller whose main character was a young messenger who zoomed around the streets of Paris on his moped. *The Courier* is an Irish movie filmed on location in gritty Dublin, a far cry from the romantic French capital. Its hero is also a young messenger, although Mark (Padraig O'Loingsigh) rides around his city on a motorcycle.

The Courier too is a small film, actually a rewarding one if you're looking for a suspense drama of a different sort.

A spill on his motorbike alerts Mark that the D-Day courier company he works for is being used to run heroin. In that spill a package is torn open to reveal a suspiciously large wad of cash.

When Mark's old buddy Danny (Andrew Connelly), a

dyed-blond, skittish junkie, winds up dead as a result of his habit, Mark is determined to get to the bottom of it no matter what the cost. The death is especially hard on him because not only has he kicked his own drug habit but he's been dating his pal's sister Colette (Cait O'Riordan), a good girl who works at a bank.

The villain in this film, Val (Gabriel Byrne), is particularly specious. He owns a toy store at a local shopping strip, as well as a video business. He directs his drug trade from his video office. He can also be particularly vicious when it suits his purpose. And as the film progresses, it does so increasingly.

Although police officer McGuigan (Ian Bannen) is also after Val, and has been from the start of the story, Mark does not want to work with him to catch the dope dealer. To him

the cop is also an enemy whom he blames along with Val for his friend's death—for his murder, as he sees it. It was under a threat of arrest from McGuigan that Danny agreed to rat on the big fish Val. But through his many eyes and ears on the streets of Dublin, Val learned of this and sold Danny dope laced with strychnine—rat poison.

While Mark invents and carries out his somewhat complicated plot to nail Val, the drug kingpin gets more and more edgy. He can't figure out who is onto him, and when the two finally do confront each other he still doesn't know who Mark is or what he wants. Adding to the building tension is Val's psycho sidekick Christy (Patrick Bergin), who seems constantly ready to explode.

The major recommendation of *The Courier* is its uniqueness. This is no Hollywood blockbuster, with all the slickness of the latest TV commercial, razor-sharp direction, and major megastars. Although the film does bog down at times and some scenes, particularly the ones that feature Mark and Colette in bedroom conversation, are labored, there is evidence of a labor of love. Besides, real-life interactions also bog down at times.

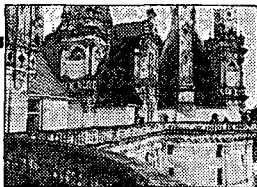
The soundtrack includes tunes

by the Irish band U2, and the use of generally upbeat-sounding songs contrasts well with the sometimes forboding feeling in *The Courier*. With the music and the scenes not always in sync, the filmgoer gets the feeling that something out of kilter may be around the bend.

The entire cast is composed of Irish actors, some of whom have never been on the big screen before. Padraig O'Loingsigh is one, and he should be happy with his debut. He appears mostly serious-minded in a role which calls for that. Cait O'Reardon, a former bass player with the Pogues, an Irish rock band, is uneven. Her Colette is a bit stilted at times, endearing at others. Gabriel Byrne, a veteran Irish stage and film actor who has appeared in a few television miniseries in America, is demonic as the villain.

Although *The Courier* is certainly not seamless, its plot sometimes confusing and most of the cast unfamiliar, it is a work that shows effort. And the directors (yes, there are two directors) get an A for that effort. Somehow the audience is drawn into this small world of urban Ireland in which a young man endangers himself and the woman he loves by trying to do the right thing.

THE STORY THAT WON



The May Mysterious Photo-Kay Kalabokis of Chicago, tions go to A. W. Cross of A. Renault of Las Vegas, an, Texas; Suzanne Black-Peggy Smith of Oshawa, Ontario, Canada; Karen S. Castillo of Daggett, California; Curt Fischer of Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin; Marc Kohler of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Matt Hudgins of Houston, Texas; Erin Alex of Abingdon, Maryland; Jim Aiello of Sea Cliff, New York; and Jeffrey Jirles of Cambridge, Ohio.

graph contest was won by Illinois. Honorable men- Sacramento, California; S. Nevada; J. F. Peirce of Bryman of Bedford, Texas; graph contest was won by Illinois. Honorable men- Sacramento, California; S. Nevada; J. F. Peirce of Bryman of Bedford, Texas;

NOT IN A THOUSAND YEARS by Kay Kalabokis

"No, honey, don't look down, it's too terrible!"

"But, Leonard, where was she? It happened so fast, I saw her just as she was falling."

"She was up in that tower on the left, but she didn't fall. Now listen to me, Margaret, if the police ask any questions, we didn't see anything, have you got that? They'd never believe it anyway. If I hadn't seen or heard it all, I wouldn't believe it myself."

"Do you think it was suicide? That would explain the wedding veil. Left at the altar and the poor girl killed herself."

"No, she didn't kill herself."

"Then someone pushed her! That explains why the man down below was shouting at her, he was trying to warn her."

"The man below is the one who killed her. Now let's go."

"You mean he shot her? But I didn't hear any gunshots."

"He didn't shoot her."

"I'm confused. She didn't jump, she wasn't pushed, he didn't shoot her, but he's the murderer all the same, and you expect me to believe a story like that?"

"All right, I'll make it brief. I heard the man from below shout, 'Rapunzel, let down your hair.' She did, he yanked, down she went, and off he ran. You're right, I don't expect anyone to believe a fairy tale like that."

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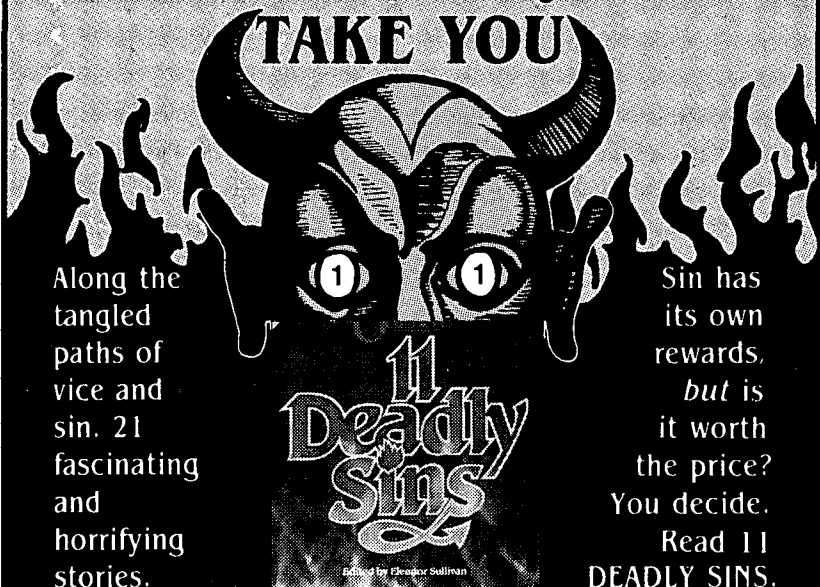
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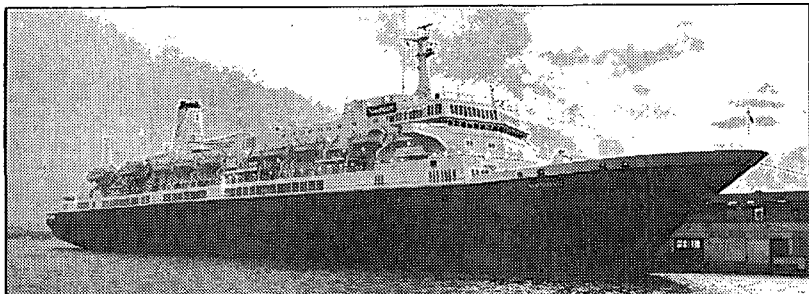
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